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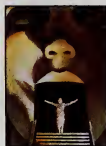
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# AMAZING<sup>®</sup>

## STORIES

# Contents



7



16

---

### NO CHAIN, NO GAIN

- 4** Kim Mohan

---

### REFLECTIONS

- 5** Robert Silverberg



45

---

### FICTION

- 7** The Futurist by James Gunn
- 16** The Dreyfuss Affair by Barry B. Longyear
- 28** In the Distance, and Ahead in Time by George Zebrowski
- 40** Unmasking the Blackman by Lois Tilton
- 45** In the Loop by Jane Mailander
- 48** The Path of Remembrance by Jack Dann
- 54** This Little Pig Had None by Thomas M. Disch
- 58** Love in the Land of Law by Alan Kirk
- 74** Taco Del and the Fabled Tree of Destiny  
by Maya Kaathryn Bohnhoff



58



28



48

## NONFICTION

- 53** Chesley Award Winners
- 60** Hugo Award Winners
- 61** A Formal Feeling Comes by Barry N. Malzberg
- 64** Brown Dwarfs and Superplanets by Stephen L. Gillett
- 70** Tomorrow's Books compiled by Susan C. Stone and Bill Fawcett
- 93** About the Authors
- 94** Back Issues and Anthologies

## LOOKING FORWARD

- 67** Under the Eye of God by David Gerrold



Cartoons by Nick Downes (page 57)  
Mark Heath (page 73)

Cover Art by Frank Kelly Freas



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# No Chain, No Gain

Kim Mohan

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Normally, I pay as much attention to chain letters as I do to the political situation in Tahiti. (Does Tahiti even *have* a political situation?) But I got something in the mail a while back that I couldn't resist:

This is a Used Paperback Club. It is not a chain letter.

It is just for phun!

Please send a used paperback book (one that is not too badly worn, or a recent issue) to the first name on your list. Retype the list and:

- A) remove the first person's name
- B) move my name to #1
- C) put your name as #2

There should only be two names on the list at all times.

Send a copy of your list to six of your friends who enjoy reading.

If you cannot respond in seven days, please let me know to be fair to those who faithfully participated.

A manila envelope will mail a paperback book. You should receive 36 paperbacks, and it will be phun to see where they all come from and what type of reading you are in for—topics that might stir up an interest or two. Seek the Mysteries!

There is seldom a dropout, so you will receive 36 books for the price of one!

That's it, except for the two names and addresses that were typed at the bottom of the sheet. Simple, phun, and—as it turned out—ephective.

After mulling it over for three days (Do I really need more books? Yes, I really do), I sent out six letters. On my desk in front of me right now are the six books I got back for the little bit of trouble I went to.

Six—not thirty-six, by the way. I knew as soon as I read the letter that someone had gotten the math wrong. The way the club is set up, there will only be six letters on which anyone's name appears in the #1 position. But that didn't make it not worth doing; six for one is still a really good deal.

I'm happy about the fact that none of the six people I wrote to, or the six people *they* wrote to who sent me books, broke the chain. I did think hard about choosing six people who would have phun with the Used Paperback Club and take it just seriously enough to keep it going. It's the first chain letter I've ever seen—and it *is* a chain letter, even though it says it's not—that gives back something for what you put into it. That's why I'm giving it a little publicity here. It's a great idea, and a good way for us to share a little bit of our library with someone who might turn out to be a kindred soul.

The six books I got back are an interesting little collection, and I intend to store them on my shelf in a special place, even though that's contrary to my fixation with keeping all my books Organized. (I may never read 'em, but I know where they all are.)

The sextet includes three books I know I'll keep and read and three I

already owned—which will still be put to good use, because I can give the extra copies to someone else who might enjoy them.

Even though the six people I wrote to are all intimately involved in the science-fiction community, none of the three keepers I got back is a science fiction or fantasy book; of the three duplicates, two are SF and one is horror. (And the book I sent out was a horror novel—which, if I had it to do over again, I would re-think, because I'm afraid the person I sent it to probably already owned it.)

One of my book-givers took the responsibility pretty seriously; as she wrote, "This invitation immediately presented all kinds of dilemmas. Give away one of my books? If it's good, I want to keep it; if not, why would I send someone a book I didn't like? But mainly, it seems to me that you would probably be pretty familiar with any science fiction I might have in my library. So—here's *The Man Who Knew Infinity*. I enjoyed it, and I thought you might too."

*The Man Who Knew Infinity* is a biography of the mathematics genius Srinivasa Ramanujan—something I can't imagine thinking to buy for myself, but something I know I'm going to like now that I realize it exists—and it's *mine*. For *free* (basically). And I have the Used Paperback Club to thank for that. Sure, it's a chain letter; let's not kid ourselves. But it's a chain with no weak links—and that's another thing that sets it apart from every other chain letter I've seen. ♦

# Reflections

## Robert Silverberg

Baseball fans have their fat volumes of statistics—the vast compilations of the players' batting and earned run averages, strikeout totals, saves, stolen bases, home run production, and whatnot—and now we have one of our own, a fascinating reference book indeed. I'm referring to *Reginald's Science Fiction and Fantasy Awards: A Comprehensive Guide to the Awards and Their Winners*, edited by Daryl F. Mallett and Robert Reginald. The first edition of this compilation appeared in 1981, but somehow it eluded my attention. Now a second edition has appeared, published by the estimable Borgo Press that the sf scholar and bibliographer R. Reginald runs out of San Bernardino, California. If your bookseller can't supply a copy of it, you can doubtless get it direct from Borgo (Box 2845, San Bernardino CA 92406) at \$29.95 for the clothbound edition or \$19.95 for the paperback.

A copy of the book wandered my way a couple of months ago. Not unnaturally, the first thing I did was to look up "Silverberg, Robert" in the Author Index, and I did indeed find an ego-pleasing array of entries: my assortment of Hugo and Nebula awards, my Locus and SF Chronicle awards, a notation indicating that I had once been a Worldcon Guest of Honor, and even the Inktop award that the San Diego Comicon graciously gave me a few years ago, even though my contributions to the world of comic books have not been particularly distinguished ones.

But what especially caught my attention in this roster of my career achievements were these:

*Gilgames* 1985, 1987  
*Lazar Komarcic* 1986, 1987, 1988,  
1989/1990  
*Premios Cometa d'Argento* 1974  
*Prix Apollo* 1975  
*Prix Cosmos* 1981

The *Gilgames* is actually the *Premio Gilgames de Narrativa Fantastica*, given in Barcelona each year for the outstanding science-fiction, fantasy, and horror works published in the Spanish language. I won mine for my novel *Dying Inside* and for a fantasy story that I blush to say I am unable to identify by translating its Spanish title ("Tal Como Esta") back into English. Some other winners of the *Gilgames* over the years have been John Brunner, Jack Vance, Philip K. Dick, and Gene Wolfe. The *Apollo* and the *Cosmos* are both French awards for novels; the *Cometa d'Argento*, or Silver Comet, came from Italy. As for the *Lazar Komarcic*, that's a special favorite of mine—the Hugo-equivalent of the former country of Yugoslavia, which I have won on five separate occasions for stories that were printed in that unhappy land without my permission and, of course, without my receiving any payment whatever.

What fascinates me most about the Reginald-Mallett encyclopedia, though, is not what it tells me about my own professional accomplish-

ments—I was already aware, after all, that I had won all those awards—but what it says about the international nature of science fiction, which is a topic that I have always found extraordinarily interesting.

Americans didn't invent science fiction, as anyone who knows the work of H. G. Wells, Jules Verne, or Lucian of Samosata can testify. But it was Americans who made it a popular publishing phenomenon, which is why our best known annual achievement award is called the Hugo—after Hugo Gernsback, who founded the world's first science-fiction magazine, *Amazing Stories*, in 1926.

Just as baseball and basketball, to name a couple of other American inventions, are now played virtually everywhere in the world, so too has science fiction spread from land to land. *The Guide to Science Fiction and Fantasy Awards* tells the tale:

Here is the *Atorox* award, named for the robot hero of Finnish science-fiction writer Aarne Haapakoski (1904-1961) and given annually for the best science fiction or fantasy story published in Finland. Ari Teronen is the most recent winner listed, for his story "Matkalla Nurin Kaannettyyn Avaruuteen"—which, of course, means "En Route to the Inverted Universe."

Here is the *Galaxy*, given in China. Wu Xiankui won it in 1986 for "Warrior Breaks Through Hurricanes." The *Grand Prix de la Science Fiction Française* went in 1990 to Francis Berthelot for his novel, *Rivage des*

*Intouchables*. Jan Hlavicka won the 1989 *Karel Capek* in Czechoslovakia for "By Head Against the Air."

And on and on around the globe. The most recent listed winner of Germany's *Kurd Lasswitz* is editor and writer Wolfgang Jeschke, for *Midas*. The Argentinian Science Fiction and Fantasy Achievement Award, *Mas Alla*, went in 1986 to Daniel Barberi, for *Un Paseo con Geronimo*. Brazil, in 1989, honored Ivan Carlos Regina with the *Nova* for his short story "Pela Voloruzacao de Vida." A Swedish award—a Dutch award—a Japanese award—one from the French-speaking part of Canada—a Russian award—and, perhaps, later editions of Reginald-Mallett will bring us news of Portuguese, Egyptian, Bolivian, Nigerian, or Malaysian sf awards whose existences are as yet unknown to us.

You will note that all of the awards in the past few paragraphs are for stories originally published in languages other than English. As I look through the listings of foreign awards in Reginald-Mallett, I see, naturally, many names familiar to you and me—Aldiss, Farmer, Haldeman, Dick, Zelazny, Le Guin, Herbert, Leiber, and, yes, Silverberg—because much of the best English-language sf is published regularly in foreign translation and any highly regarded American or English sf novel is likely to appear within a year or two in seven or eight overseas editions. (Generally quite a lucrative experience for the writers, unless they happen to be popular in Yugoslavia.) You would expect to see

the science-fiction publishers in other countries vying for the work of such writers as I've just called off, and you do: for they are the recognized stars of the sf firmament, an international elite of writers.

But what these lists of awards tell me is that science fiction has in the past two decades become in a dozen or more countries of the world what it rarely was before: an *indigenous* art form. Writers raised on translations of Heinlein or Asimov or Clarke are now writing their own science fiction in Holland and Czechoslovakia and Brazil.

How good is it? Is it just a pallid imitation of the American product—and not necessarily the best of the American product? Or are there writers in those countries whose award-winning work, if we could only read it, would prove to be worthy of putting beside the finest of our own Hugo and Nebula winners?

I don't know. My own foreign language abilities are better suited to asking highway directions in Italy or making my way through a menu in France than they are to getting me through the subtleties and stylistic merits of non-English fiction; and Polish and Czech and Finnish are as remote to my understanding as the languages of the Pleistocene folk. Such people as Frederik Pohl and Donald A. Wollheim have made sporadic attempts to publish magazines or anthologies of translated sf stories, and the material, in the main, did not seem to be outstanding. Perhaps that

was the fault of the translators, or maybe the wrong stories were chosen. I can't say. We have also had the novels of Stanislaw Lem of Poland and the Strugatsky brothers of Russia translated into English, and a smattering of others; and certainly some of those books have had enthusiastic followers here.

I am curious about the quality of Philippe Curval's novel *Cette Chère Humanité* and Adalberto Cerosimo's short story "Dove Sono le Navi" and Masahiro Noda's novelette "Lemon Pie Oyashiki Yokochō O Banchi," but those curiosities may never be gratified. Still, I look with wonder and pleasure on the foreign entries in the Reginald-Mallett guidebook, pondering the possibility that science-fiction writers of the quality of Ray Bradbury and Theodore Sturgeon and C. L. Moore may at this moment be at work on masterpieces in their native Romanian or Norwegian or Catalanian; and will we ever know?

It's an interesting book for a lot of other reasons, too. Where else will you find the names of the winners of the *Prometheus*, which honors science fiction with a libertarian slant? Or those of the Count Dracula Society's annual award? The *Golden Lion* of the Edgar Rice Burroughs fans? The *Gray Mouser*? The *Gryphon*? The *Invisible Little Man* Award?

Check them out. Much fun. Tell Borgo Press I sent you. Maybe they'll give me a *Borgo*. ♦



# The Futurist

James Gunn



Illustration by  
Nicholas Jainschigg

The sphinx materialized on the United Nations plaza at 3 A.M. on October 9, 1999. At that time of night no one was injured, but several metal sculptures were crushed under its apparently substantial mass. At least the sculptures were never seen again, and their remains were presumed to rest beneath the dull, black figure.

A United Nations guard happened to be looking at the spot when the object appeared. It didn't shimmer or look insubstantial at any time. "One instant it wasn't there," he said later—not once but many times; "the next instant it was. I couldn't believe my eyes, I can tell you. I blinked a couple times, thinking I was seeing things or maybe dreaming. But there it was."

There it was indeed. One hundred meters exactly from human head to lion's tail, and twenty meters tall at the shoulders, forty meters at the head. And it was heavy. Although it had arrived without apparent impact or sound, it had sunk almost a meter into the pavement and the soil and rock beneath. Nothing and no one could move it. Construction firms tried to elevate one end or the other without any result other than to break their equipment, and a floating crane succeeded only in tilting the wide barge on which it rested.

Acids did not react with the surface of the object, drills simply slid off, diamonds made no mark on it, and torches did not even heat up the surrounding area. Even a thermite wand did no damage. The object apparently had infinite capacity for absorbing heat, or diverting it, although instruments mounted nearby could detect no radiation from it, in any part of the spectrum. It attracted compass needles, however, and airplanes flying overhead had to compensate for its presence. Gravimeters registered the presence of an object several hundred times the mass that the size of the object would justify under any reasonable assumption of density.

It responded to no attempts at communication. Messages in all languages, living and dead, were directed at it in every form known to humanity. At first the messages were cautiously friendly; at the end they turned impatient, even truculent. Nothing moved it. The sphinx sat there, stolid and unresponsive, staring blindly at the north entrance to the United Nations, asking its eternal riddle of those who came and went. Not "What walks on four legs in the morning, two legs at noon, and three legs in the evening?" But "What am I, what am I doing here, and what does it mean?"

Many people thought they had the answer. Some said that since its measurements were so precisely metrical it had to be of human origin, but others said that the meter was an easy measure to deduce, much easier than the foot or the yard, for instance, and that this fact in itself meant nothing. Nevertheless, an industry developed to speculate about the ways in which the measurements of this enigmatic object were intended to predict the future, and as a consequence great things were in store for humanity; others insisted on the basis of equally valid extrapolations, great misfortunes.

Some said that the sphinx was a human concept, emerging from human mythology, and therefore the object had to be humanly constructed. Others, citing its

weight, mysterious appearance, and the unknown material from which it was constructed, said, even more vehemently, that it clearly was alien.

Some mystics suggested that the object proved that the Earth had been visited thousands of years ago by aliens, and that this was the Second Coming, or at least the second coming. They insisted that the Egyptian sphinxes were proof of such visitations and speculated that they might not be mythological but carved, so to speak, from life.

The aliens, they said, could reasonably be supposed to be sphinxes. And since sphinxes came in all sizes, though many were quite large, the present example might be life-sized. And a few, though they were a schismatic group, maintained that the object on the United Nations plaza was a living alien. It had an incredibly slow metabolism, they said, and therefore lived an incredibly long time, perhaps comparable to the life spans of stars or galaxies. In time, they said, it would open its eyes, and perhaps its terrible mouth, and see the world and judge it.

"What rough beast?" they quoted, and fell to their knees in reverence or in fear.

The scientists, however, though clearly puzzled, maintained that the object was not only inanimate but always had been and always would be. When asked how it had got to its present location without moving, they insisted that it hadn't moved under its own power. And when asked to explain its appearance suddenly out of nowhere, they replied that they had only the guard's word for that.

It was there, indisputably there, and its presence did the name of science no good. Science had no explanation for it, not one, and the mystics had many. Too many.

The object sat there for a solid year, guarded day and night. Sensible people might have expected the speculation and the psychological uproar to fade away, the enigmatic presence of the sphinx to be accepted at last as no more marvelous than the Great Sphinx at Giza. But it didn't and wasn't, and finally, precisely a year later, on October 9, 2000, the sphinx opened its jaw.

\* \* \*

The jaw dropped, or gaped, as one of the guards put it. Fortunately no sphinx-worshippers were present at that hour or they might have fainted in anticipation or dread, or expired on the spot. But the object emitted no sound. Instead, a tongue emerged as if in preparation for a giant raspberry and turned into a stairway complete with railings that ran out silently until it reached the ground.

Nothing more occurred for long seconds—long enough for guards to draw their weapons, sound the alarm, summon help, and run around madly shouting, turning on additional lights, and approaching the stairway with caution befitting their individual supplies of courage.

Before the Secretary General arrived, or any of the undersecretaries, or even the mayor or the chief of police, the boldest of the guards, who had forced his reluctant body within ten meters of the stairway, observed a pair of bare feet appear at the top of the stairs, one after the other, the calves of smooth, tan-colored legs topped by loose white trousers or culottes, and then a face.

The guard almost fainted at the vision, and, indeed, as he later confided to a friend, although not the media or

even his immediate superior, came within a hair of shooting the creature there and then, seeing in that terrible moment the face of an alien growing directly out of the creature's thighs. Only as he was leveling his pistol did he realize that the creature was bending over, peering out.

Seeing the gun, the creature shouted, in understandable English, "Don't shoot!" And quickly came down the stairs, its hands held high, to stand trembling in front of the guard. "I come in peace!" it said hastily, although one of the guards reported that he thought the creature said, "Hack 'em in pieces!"

If confusion had been a proper description for the state of affairs when the sphinx opened its mouth, panic was the condition that followed. A creature stood on the plaza surrounded by milling guards; it was soon joined by throngs of curious passersby even at that hour of the morning. Lights came on in nearby office buildings and condominiums. Sirens raped the air. Someone finally thought of forming a line of guards and ushering the stranger through it to the north doors of the General Assembly building. Unfortunately, no one had a key.

In the midst of the turmoil, the stairway retracted itself into the mouth of the sphinx and the jaw closed. No one noticed, but when one of the guards looked, and raised a shout, the sphinx was as impenetrable and as enigmatic as ever. It had emitted, however, an oracle.

Fortunately, at this time the Secretary General arrived. He was a man of great international distinction and even some wisdom. Once he had been informed about recent events, he looked at the humanlike creature in white tunic and culottes and bare feet standing close to the broad front doors with an air of uncertainty, or perhaps even of timidity, he ordered that the doors be opened and the creature taken to his office. After some delay a key was located, and the creature was escorted—no one wanted to touch it—to an elevator and up to the proper office.

Following these events witnessed by many, much of the rest of the events that followed is supported by tape recordings, video tapes, and interviews. The Secretary General recalled that he motioned toward a chair and when the creature sank into it, its knees working as if accustomed to such equipment for sitting, the Secretary General took a first full look at the creature's lack of weapons, apparent defenselessness, and absence of threat, and told the guards to leave, warning them to say nothing about the events of the evening until they were given the opportunity to do so in official circumstances. As soon as they emerged from the building, they began telling everything they knew to the reporters who by now had gathered.

In the office, the Secretary General said when they were alone, "I understand you speak English. Where do you come from?"

"I think," the creature said, its eyes moving uneasily between the Secretary General and the door, "you should call an emergency meeting of the permanent members of the Security Council."

The Secretary General's eyes had been opened from a sound sleep by the events of the past hour, but now they opened a little wider. "Well, you do speak English, and very well. And you know our organization. I will do as

you suggest. Do not concern yourself about that. But you can talk to me first."

The creature shook its head. "From this moment anyone who spends any time alone with me is under suspicion of knowing more than anyone else. No one will believe that you do not know more than you are willing to reveal. I do not think you want your authority undermined in that way. It is better if you know nothing."

The Secretary General stroked his chin, a little stubbly at this hour in the morning. "There's that, of course. But I can't get all the members of the Security Council to a meeting in the middle of the night, and not even the permanent members without some idea of what the subject of the meeting will be."

"That's obvious," the creature said, turning its alien brown eyes toward the Secretary General. "Me."

"Well, yes. I'm sure the permanent members of the Security Council would think that enough reason to gather. But couldn't you give me some hint as to what you want to communicate?"

"I will tell you when I tell the others. There are reasons, including the one I gave. My time is limited. I hope you are recording this."

Of course," the Secretary General said, having already pushed the button on his desk that turned on the video cameras behind pictures and mirrors in his office when he sat on the edge of his desk. "Are you going to give us a revelation? An ultimatum? Will it create panic? Will it cause war?"

The creature shook its head. "I will tell you when I tell the others."

So it was that at 4:30 A.M. on October 9, 2000, sleepy and tousled ambassadors gathered in the Security Council chamber, glaring about them and conferring grumpily with their entourage of assistants. Shortly after the last group had entered, the Secretary General emerged, followed by the barefoot creature from the sphinx. It looked around the room with unconcealed curiosity, somewhat like a tourist observing Westminster Abbey or the House of Parliament, the British ambassador reflected. He remembered thinking that it might take out a camera at any moment and begin snapping photographs.

"This crea—person," the Secretary General said, "has emerged from that object that has been sitting in front of this building for the past year. I have tried to interview it without success. It has told me nothing except to call a meeting of this body."

The Russian ambassador rose like a sullen bear. "Russia finds this difficult to believe. We refuse to accept this information, since it is so ridiculous that it cannot be true."

"Is it harder to believe than the object in front of this building? But that exists, and there are witnesses to the fact that the object opened, let down a staircase, and this person came out."

The Russian waved a heavy hand. "Witnesses!" he said, expressing his scorn of such easily suborned evidence.

"Where do you come from?" he demanded of the creature.

I come from the future," the creature said.

The ambassadors sat back in their padded chairs, silenced, for once in their professional lives, by the crea-

ture's revelation. And then as the implications of the last statement began to occur to them, questions burst forth.

"Did we—?"

"Will we—?"

"Then has socialism—?"

"How do we—?"

"What do you—?"

The Secretary General held up his hand. "Ambassadors! Perhaps I might put to this—person—some of the questions that have occurred to us all. After that, you may present individually the questions that I do not cover."

The ambassadors nodded or grumbled assent.

The Secretary General turned to the stranger. He was unusually good-looking, the American ambassador recalled, and films confirm her impression; she also remembered thinking what a great, even tan he had on his legs and face and arms. "Now," the Secretary General said, "perhaps you will tell us why we should believe you. It is easy to claim time travel, but difficult to imagine. Or to prove."

"Is it any more difficult to imagine than the time machine I arrived in?"

"That is a time machine?"

"Doesn't it look like one? Actually, it's the only kind there is."

"But how do we know?" asked the American ambassador, a handsome dark-haired woman, and then glanced apologetically at the Secretary General.

"You'll have to take my word for it," the creature said.

"But you could verify your statement, if you wished," the Secretary General said, "by telling us about important events that will happen."

"Since they haven't happened, that would be no proof. I could make up anything and you wouldn't know the difference. Unless it were something that is to happen in the next hour or day, and I don't have that information. And my time here is too short to wait for the occurrence of events months or years away."

"You must tell me," the Russian ambassador broke in. He had accepted the new free enterprise system but he had grown to maturity in the heady days of Soviet power, and old ideologies reasserted themselves. "Communism ultimately prevailed, da?"

The person from the future looked down at its hands. "Yes and no."

"What kind of answer is that?" the Russian shouted.

"The only kind that is accurate," the stranger said hesitantly. "Look: If someone had asked one hundred years ago whether the United States would be a socialist country by the year 2000, what kind of answer would you give?"

The Secretary General held up his hand again. "Perhaps we could approach this subject in another way: How far in the future do you come from?"

"Exactly one hundred years."

"And how many does your—time machine—hold?"

"I'm the only one."

"How were you chosen?"

"It was sort of a—lottery," the stranger said. "Among qualified persons."

"Are you male or female?" the American ambassador burst out.

The stranger looked down at its hands, hesitating. "We don't ask that question where I come from. But I realize that your culture does not feel comfortable without that knowledge. You can consider me male."

"And this time machine," the distinguished French ambassador said in his distinguished Gallic accent, "of what different substance is it made?"

"I don't know much science," the visitor from the future admitted. "I am a kind of specialist in Twentieth Century history and culture. All I know is that the machine is built from a substance obtained from distant astronomical bodies and that this substance has something to do with its ability to reverse time's flow."

"That means," the British ambassador said, with Holmesian deduction, "that you have interstellar flight."

"So it would seem," the visitor said. "In any case, the machine is more permanent than stone and virtually indestructible. It has to be, you see, because it must endure until 2099 in spite of your attempts to penetrate it and, that failing, to destroy it."

"We wouldn't do that," the Secretary General protested.

"And why must it endure until 2099?" said the ambassador from the People's Republic of China.

"Travel into the past is possible by reversing time's arrow," the visitor said, "but you can travel into the future only moment by moment. By their permanence you can identify time machines."

"I see," said the Chinese ambassador, and then his eyes clouded. "No, I do not see. How do you reverse—as you call it—time's arrow?"

"I don't have the slightest idea," the visitor said, "and if I did I would not have been chosen for this mission. As I said, I am not a scientist. And even if I knew I couldn't tell you, because, you see, the reversal of time's arrow was not possible until 2090. Even if I told you, you couldn't do it—because you didn't. Do you understand?"

"I see," the American ambassador said. "You mean that the future is fixed. If it didn't happen, it won't happen."

"Yes," the visitor said, "and no. There are anomalies, real and unreal, created by my presence here."

"How can it be both yes and no?" the Russian ambassador asked disgustedly.

The visitor from the future looked unhappy. "If I have come from the future, it means that there is only one future and therefore it is unchangeable. That is right. And wrong, too. It is both right and wrong in the same way that your physicists consider light to be both a particle and a wave."

"I don't understand that either," the French ambassador said.

"Actually, our scientists have said that it is neither," the visitor said. "The problem is that you don't have the mathematics to express the time anomalies or the intellectual history to understand them."

"Don't underestimate us," the Secretary General said. "We have scientists who understand these things."

"How would you explain indeterminacy to an intelligent Roman?" the visitor asked.

"But we're only one hundred years behind you," the British ambassador observed, "not two thousand."

"In absolute time that is true," the visitor said. "In scientific time, one hundred years of future development is equivalent to two thousand years of history. Knowledge increases exponentially, and the difference is greater between me and you than between you and that Roman. In our time . . . Well, I'll get to that in a moment, but let me say this—even we think that our children are strange, and their children we can't understand at all."

"But if you can't change the future," the Secretary General said, "why are you here?" His eyes widened as a thought occurred to him. "Are you a refugee?"

"No. I realize this would make you more comfortable, because it is a term you understand, but I am an emissary."

"Then why?" the Secretary General demanded. Even his inexhaustible patience seemed to be reaching bottom.

"Because the future would be different, in a way that I will explain to you in a moment, if I had not come in my machine to speak to you about the future. How could it be otherwise? I am what is known in my time as a causality loop. I am here because I was here. Understand?"

"I don't understand," said the Russian ambassador, "and I think we should subject this man to expert interrogation until he speaks truth."

No one in the room had any doubt what he meant by interrogation. Even the visitor from the future shivered.

"That would be unwise," the Secretary General said.

"Even if it were not inhumane, we do not know what powers our visitor has—or his machine—or the future that sent him."

"The United States would veto that course immediately," the American ambassador said.

The visitor tried to look powerful, without success. More than anything else, he looked like a beggar asked to deliver a revelation to the Pope.

The American ambassador turned to the visitor. "But you should tell us *something* about the future."

The visitor from the future looked beleaguered. "I know that you don't understand, and that is one reason I have come here to speak with you. But all the things I want to tell you, you don't want to hear. All you want to know is what the future holds."

"That's the only subject about which you're an authority," the British ambassador said, "and the only reason we're gathered together at this ungodly hour."

The visitor looked around the table at the mixture of faces and expressions. "All right, I'll tell you," he said. "You wouldn't like it."

\* \* \*

Horror jumped from face to face as one after another, according to their quickness of wit, each ambassador and aide understood the implications of what the visitor had said.

"You see?" said the visitor unhappily. "The first thing I have told you, and you're upset. What you must understand about the future is that you wouldn't understand it."

"Now just a minute," the American ambassador said. She was the quickest of the group, as everyone later agreed. "You're here. That's something."

"Yes," the visitor said. "That's something you can understand and appreciate: The future exists. All the prob-

lems you consider life-threatening have failed to wipe out the human race. Surely that is cause for self-congratulation. You have reason to celebrate."

The visitor waited. No one celebrated, although a few of those present looked relieved and some even smiled.

"But there are so many problems," said the French ambassador. "Overpopulation, pollution, war—"

"Economic disorders, racism, imperialism," the Russian ambassador added.

"Energy shortages, revolution, religious intolerance, terrorism," the American ambassador continued.

"These and others that your wisest people and gloomiest prophets have not yet foreseen," the visitor agreed. "They caused great misery of body, mind, and spirit. But something your era has not yet learned: Misery isn't terminal. Put that with your other epigrams that sum up the wisdom of your time, such as 'There ain't no such thing as a free lunch,' 'The map is not the territory,' 'This too shall pass,' 'Whatever can go wrong will go wrong,' and 'Winning is something but surviving is everything.'"

"That isn't one of our sayings," the American ambassador objected.

"Of course it isn't," the visitor said, rubbing his forehead. "Sometimes I get confused. It's not easy trying to remember what is appropriate to this era and what isn't."

"Do you realize," the Russian ambassador said, "that we are accepting the truth of what this [here he used a Russian word for a person who is not only a liar but a traitor to the state] has said: that he comes from the future?"

"Do we have a choice?" asked the Secretary General.

"We only assume," said the Chinese ambassador, who had been silent for some time.

"What is the point?" the British ambassador asked.

"For the human race," the visitor said faintly, "the point is that problems are meant to be solved. It got where it is by solving problems. When humanity stops solving problems it will stop being humanity and become another domesticated animal, suited for a single set of conditions and no other."

"This is wisdom," the Chinese ambassador agreed.

"Wisdom?" said the French ambassador.

"There is something to be said for domesticated animals," the Russian said.

"I am afraid," the American ambassador said, "there are some among us who already are domesticated, preferring to retreat to conditions they know rather than solving problems."

"On the other hand," the Secretary General broke in, conciliatory as his office demanded, "our visitor tells us that the problems will be solved. That is something."

"But how will they be solved?" the Russian broke in. "That is all-important."

"I can't tell you," the visitor said. "There isn't time, and even if I had the time and you the patience, some wouldn't believe me and others would believe me too readily and wouldn't exert themselves to do what must be done."

"Why does our visitor keep referring to time?" the Chinese ambassador asked. He smiled inscrutably. "Surely a time-traveler has all the time in the world."

"I wish it were so," the visitor said weakly. "But time



travel is more exhausting than anyone thought, and I have only a few moments with you before I must return to my time machine and the artificial hibernation that will allow me to survive until 2099, if everything goes according to plan."

"Nonsense!" the Russian said.

"I'm not sure, old man, that leaving would be quite cricket," the British ambassador said.

"This man is free to come or go as he wishes," the American said. "What of this future awakening?"

"There will be a great celebration," the visitor said dreamily. "All my dear ones will be present: my nest mothers, my nestlings, my youth-wife, my mid-wife, my sex partners. . . ."

The American ambassador looked shocked.

"We're discussing matters of great importance with a pervert," the Russian said.

"These matters are best kept in the home," said the British ambassador.

The French ambassador smiled inscrutably.

"I apologize for offending your sense of morality," the visitor said. "It is such a delicate thing, this sense of morality. I do not mean to suggest that we are not a moral people. We, too, are offended by immorality."

"That's hard to believe," said the American.

"Our morality is not your morality. Of all the things I had to learn about you and your times, your morality was the most difficult."

"How did you learn about us?" the Secretary General asked.

"We have records of your time: films, tapes, documentaries, fiction. . . . But you should understand that your period is not particularly interesting."

The ambassadors sat back, offended more by this remark than by those earlier.

"I spent years studying it at great personal sacrifice," the visitor hastened on. "After my time machine arrived, you must have wondered why it stood without opening or even announcing its purpose for a year."

"That question did come up," the Secretary General remarked.

"I was sampling your society in *situ*, so to speak, absorbing your television and radio shows, your news, your music, your advertisements, your art, your disagreements—like no one in my time can understand. They seem to us like debates about how many angels can dance on the head of a pin."

"We have weapons that can destroy the world," the Russian growled.

"But no comparable-sized issues," the visitor said.

"Well, freedom—" began the American ambassador.

"Brotherhood," said the Frenchman.

"Equality," said the Russian.

"Your belief, if I interpret it correctly," the visitor said hesitantly, "is that there are differences between people usually ascertainable by visual observation. Or if not that, by a comparison of values."

"Come now," said the British ambassador.

"That is how it appears. Some are shorter or taller; some are closer to some arbitrary standard of esthetics;

some are pigmented differently; some speak other than the prevailing language or dialect; some are better favored by birth or inheritance—"

"It was otherwise in the late Soviet Union," the Russian said gloomily.

"Or education or fortune or talent. You make judgments, as well, about attributes you can't see, such as personality or temperament, but a person's most basic nature—goodness, kindness, wisdom, honesty—is beyond you."

"Surely these things are beyond all men," said the Chinese ambassador.

"Of course you do not have the psychometron," the visitor said, "which allows us to ascertain such matters early in life and to make appropriate adjustments."

Everyone but the Russian looked shocked, and he looked interested.

"What kind of devil's work is this?" asked the Briton.

"How can you interfere?" the American said. "Who are you to decide what people should be like?"

"You prefer children to grow up unhappy and maladjusted until they must be turned over to the art of a psychologist or the punishments of a penal system," the visitor said. "Better, you say, to leave human personality to chance, or to God."

"Amen to that," said the American.

"And yet we leave to personal choice many intimate aspects of life that you wish to control. You believe that people should have only one mate at a time, although in some circumstances, to some of you, casual sexual partners are permissible."

"Not in the right circles, old man," said the Briton.

"Not since AIDS," the American added.

"This makes no sense to us. People, we know as you do, relate to each other in many ways, from the most casual to the most intimate. How can one person relate to one other person, and the other way around, in every satisfying way, all the time for many years? We encourage a variety of relationships to serve as many socially meaningful and personally pleasing functions as is desirable for the individual or society."

"Well, I call it immorality," the American said.

"If that is what the future holds, we shall have no part of it," the Briton said.

"Now, there may be something in what the visitor says," the Frenchman observed.

"Yet you or your children or your children's children will have a part of it; in fact, you will create it, and you will call it moral. A society gives approving names to what it approves. We have youth-wife, mid-wife, mature-wife, companion-wife, sex-wife, and, of course, females have just as many male relationships, and each has same-sex relationships as well. . . ."

"That is disgusting," the American ambassador said.

"Western perversions," said the Russian.

"We should not be judgmental," the Frenchman said.

"This society of yours," said the visitor, "has many more words for disapproval than for approval. It is a symptom of a repressive society."

"Now who speaks words of disapproval?" the Chinese ambassador asked.

"Who are you to judge us?" asked the Secretary General. "I am, of course, the perfect judge," the visitor said. "I am the only judge you will ever have: the future. From my vantage point it seems clear that your society is sick. It is easy to judge the past; it is impossible to judge the future."

The Russian pushed himself back from the table and lumbered to his feet. "I move that we execute this creature as a danger to world peace and get back to our regular business."

\* \* \*

Outside the United Nations building a crowd had gathered, summoned by the mysterious force that draws ill-assorted humans into silent spectators of fires and accidents or into mobs inciting each other to violence. All nationalities were represented, as befitted the location, and all ages, and the entire spectrum of political, social, and religious convictions. There were those in the group who would have killed their neighbors without compunction if they had known what they were thinking, and others who would blow up an entire cluster of strangers, including children, if they thought it would further their cause. Still others would have clapped into prison people in the crowd who looked dangerous or dressed or talked differently or held opinions contrary to theirs. But now they were protected from each other by their proximity and their ignorance and their mutual focus on great, if enigmatic, events. People kept adding themselves to the throng and the north plaza, already crowded by the sphinx, was getting filled. At first silent, the crowd had begun to shout questions at the doors of the slab-shaped building, and the group itself was gaining its own identity with a slowly building roar. The guards, now reinforced, had nervously summoned help from the New York City police.

Inside the Security Council chamber, the uproar was comparable to that in the plaza when the sphinx had uttered its oracle. People shouted and shook their fists at one another. In the midst of the turmoil, the visitor sat cringing in his chair, holding his hands to his ears. As if in response to a situation that they could neither hear nor witness, the crowd outside shouted a protest at nothing in particular.

Finally the Secretary General's quiet voice brought order once more. "The motion of the Russian ambassador has been ruled out of order. This meeting will continue. The ambassador may leave the meeting, but it will continue without him, and what this visitor from the future has to say will be heard. He will tell us what he has to say in his own way, and perhaps soon he will get to what he has come about."

"Our visitor claims perfection," said the Chinese ambassador, who had remained seated and silent throughout the disturbance.

The Russian looked at the door and slowly returned to his seat.

The visitor shook his head. "We know that society will continue to change, that what we consider moral and reasonable will give way to something considered more moral and more reasonable that we will consider as sinful as you consider us. But we have something you do not. . . ."

"And what is that?" asked the American.

"We have a sense of the future; we know we must accept it," the visitor said. "We have made a beginning where it counts—with children. We have established the right of children to be wanted, to be loved, and to be brought up in an environment capable of developing, without warp or frustration, the potentials of a genetic heritage as free from flaws as we can make it. . . ."

"You not only tamper with their minds," the American ambassador said, "you tamper with their genes as well."

"In the right hands," the Russian said, "not a bad idea."

"For once I agree with my Russian colleague," said the Chinese ambassador.

"The administration I represent does not approve of abortions," the American said.

"Of course no abortion is involved," said the visitor.

"No one would want to become pregnant or to impregnate someone else if the child's right to those conditions was not assured. No one would wish to bring a new life into this world if its essentially happy nature might be frustrated by its circumstances, if it might experience more pain than joy."

"Certainly no one would disagree with that," said the Secretary General, trying to bring the group back together.

"Of course this is all theoretical," the visitor said. "All children are conceived and brought to term extra utero—"

"He means in test tubes," said the American. "*Like Brave New World.*"

"We know what he means," said the Frenchman.

"Once born," the visitor said, "children are given to a child-rearing system whose personnel are suited by temperament and prepared by training to provide a healthy environment for the growing child."

"That sounds pretty unhealthy to me," the American woman said, sounding more and more like the Russian. "Like a bunch of test-tube orphans."

"They are not orphans," the visitor said firmly, "but nestlings. You allow every untrained, ill-tempered, overburdened parent to raise a future citizen. We call that barbaric, stupid, and potentially disastrous."

"More words of disapproval?" the Chinese ambassador asked.

"You speak of poverty cycles and criminal patterns and do nothing about them. On the other hand, a solution to these problems you imagine as children ripped from loving parents and incarcerated in unfeeling institutions."

"Some matters are better left to chance," said the Frenchman.

"You'll never find anyone more concerned about raising children than the parents themselves," the Briton added.

"Chance seldom provides the love and care a child needs. Primitive instincts have a darker side," the visitor said.

"We must commend our visitor for honesty," the Secretary General said. "He told us we wouldn't like it."

"Maybe so; maybe not. This world that he describes sounds more and more like the old communes," the Russian said.

"If you were transported to my world," the visitor said, "you would feel like your great-grandparents if they

were moved from their gaslight and horse-and-buggy world to your world of electricity and electronics, of air-planes and space travel, of television and terrorism and hydrogen bombs."

"We are not our great-grandparents," the American said.

"At first you would be astonished by all the marvels," the visitor said. "Then you would be disturbed by the changes. Sprats and chundleys and go-forths and willy-nillies and—but these are only words, and I no more have time to tell you what they describe than to tell you how you are going to solve your problems."

"What are you going to tell us, then?" the Secretary General asked.

"You want me to tell you about the future," the visitor said, "and I must tell you that you would experience astonishment, discomfort, then psychological disorientation. In my world, events move faster, life scurries by, and yet there are few jobs and a great deal more leisure. Less is said and more is understood. You would find that unsettling. But to all of this you could become accustomed; you never would feel quite at home, but like your great-grandparents you could learn to live with it and maybe even to appreciate it."

Outside the United Nations building, the crowd was growing even larger—and more unruly. The time was 6 a.m., and the gathering of night people and news gatherers had been augmented by early risers and early workers. The entire north plaza was covered with upright bodies from the sphinx to the doors of the Assembly building, and those doors were being threatened by occasional surges.

The Secretary General lifted his head as if he could hear the gathering crowd, but that was impossible. "I understand," he said, indicating the receiver in his ear that some might have mistaken for a hearing aid, "that we must release some information soon or face the possibility of mob violence."

"That mustn't happen," the visitor said, agitated by more than the prospect would suggest. "I have come to bring you a gift from the future. Announce that to the crowd and the news media."

The Secretary General nodded to an aide who walked swiftly from the chamber. "Now, what gift can the future bring the present?"

"A cure for cancer or for AIDS?" the American said.

"Inexhaustible energy?" the Briton ventured.

The visitor shook his head impatiently.

"A foolproof system of birth control," said the Chinese ambassador.

"A way to make food out of rock," the Frenchman said.

"An end to war," the Russian said. "You will destroy our hydrogen bombs."

"You must do that yourself," the visitor said. "No, none of those—"

"He was speaking about life in the future," the Secretary General said, "and he was saying there was something we could not become accustomed to."

"Yes," the visitor said with relief. "The social system."

"Nonsense," said the Russian. Later he explained that a

nation that had been through two revolutions had nothing to fear from evolution.

The British ambassador looked puzzled. "Is this what you have come back one hundred years to tell us? That we would not like the future? That we could not accept your social system?"

The visitor from the future spread his hands wide in a gesture of helplessness that had not changed. "It may not seem like much, but the experts of our era believe it is vitally important."

"I think we are wasting our time," said the Frenchman.

"All things eventually become clear," the Chinese ambassador said.

"Your time," the visitor said, "was the first to think seriously about the future. You gave birth to the futurists—those half-blind social scientists who began poking about in the leavings of the science-fiction writers."

"Futurists?" the American ambassador said.

"They talked about shaping the future through a developing system by which thoughtful people could explore possible futures, then choose among them by making the right decisions."

"That seems sensible enough," the American said.

"It is," the visitor continued, "if you are dealing with technology."

"What does technology have to do with it, old man?" the Briton asked.

The visitor looked at him as if he had asked a stupid question in class. "Technology determines what members of a society can do and can't do, what they can think and even how they can think."

"That is the function of government," the Russian said.

"Of some governments," the American responded.

"These decisions you can make," the visitor said. "You can decide how you are going to transport yourself and your goods, what you will use for energy, what goods to produce, and how you are going to communicate. You can decide how to allocate to these activities common resources, including the environment. You can decide whether to live on the moon or in the ocean depths. You can decide what weapons to use in the next war."

"Thank you very much," said the Briton.

"You can do this," the visitor said, "because though these are vitally important decisions, their consequences are elusive: No one knows what effect they will have on people's lives. Not the futurists. Not you. Not me. No one could know enough to project the chain of causality from the automobile, say, to the decay of the inner cities and the lives of the people who live in them."

"Our Marxists did," the Russian said.

"You have the problem without the cars," the American said.

"All this may be very interesting," the Secretary General said, "but is it relevant?"

"This is the gift I bring you from the future," the visitor said. "You must avoid the decisions you most desire: the ones that control people's behavior, the legal determination of what is lawful and the ethical determination of what is moral."

"But that is what governments and religions are insti-

tuted to do," the Frenchman said stiffly. The visitor from the future finally had touched him, too, and even the ambassador from China seemed repulsed.

"You can try to control morality," the visitor said. "Every society does. But every society has the morality appropriate to its circumstances, or else it is bound in chains forged by the past. Every generation, if it could, would set down for all time what is good and true, what is right and wrong, but each new generation redefines them, either through freedom to explore and innovate, or through rebellion."

"I can't agree with that," said the American.

"Focus your decision-making on technology," the visitor said. "That doesn't matter, because its ultimate significance is beyond us. Leave morality alone. You would like to set down the rules by which we, a century from now, will live, but I urge you to think. Those great-grandparents of yours—what if you had to live by their rules?"

All the ambassadors looked skeptical, if not rebellious.

"I cannot tell you all the problems people in my time have had because of disputes about morality, and I have been sent back to your time to say to you—"

"Now we're getting to it," the Secretary General muttered.

"That the future is waiting for you and that you will hate it and that it doesn't matter."

"Stupid!" the Russian ambassador shouted.

"Ridiculous!" said the Briton.

"Absurd!" said the Frenchman.

"Well!" said the American.

"Have we been gathered together at this hour," said the Chinese ambassador, "to listen to such ramblings of small meaning?"

"You have begun to denounce me," the visitor said. "Before the events of this morning are completely analyzed, you will have joined against me. For the first time in the history of the planet, everyone will be united—united against the future."

"We have seen the future," the Secretary General murmured, "and it doesn't work."

"Somewhat, each of you is thinking, we must prevent it. But gradually what I have said will seep into the minds of some of you and then a few more and a few more. You will remember that I said, 'You will solve your problems. The world will continue.' Then you will say, 'Even if it isn't a future I would care to live in, I don't want this world to end too soon; I want to see that future.' And then you will say, 'Let us make a better one.'"

The ambassadors were arguing among themselves. Virtually unnoticed by all but the Secretary General, who had his own reasons for not speaking up, the visitor from the future had gotten to his feet during his last speech and was at the door. When the others looked for him, they saw only an empty doorway.

\* \* \*

No one ever saw the man from the future again. No one admits to having seen him make his way from the Security Council meeting room to the front doors and through the crowd that had gathered on the plaza to his time machine. Perhaps he left through a side door. Perhaps he

spent a day or several days in a safe place until he could once more regain the sanctuary of his gigantic artifact. If that were true, someone had to help. When asked directly about this possibility, the Secretary General denied participating in any such maneuver.

There are, of course, diplomatic denials that are not the same as lies.

What is undeniable is that the last words of the man from the future created as much of an uproar in the world outside as they had in the Security Council chamber. What had been announced as a gift was universally denounced as interference in the personal lives and beliefs of every person on the planet. The man from the future was denounced in every political forum, from every pulpit and lectern, in every bar, on every street corner, in every living room. Mobs gathered; rage rose; violence boiled just below eruption.

What is undeniable, as well, is the presence on the United Nations plaza of the massive black sphinx. Whether or not the visitor from the future is within its protective walls, sleeping his way into the future, the sphinx remains a constant reminder that the future is inexorably approaching, second by second. Scientists and fanatics have attacked its smooth surface without damage to anything except themselves.

There it will remain, apparently, until 2099, or perhaps forever, as humans understand such terms.

What is not clear is why the society that has come to be in the year 2099 sent the Futurist back, knowing that his appearance might keep the future from arriving. The Futurist would say that he came back because he had come back, the kind of statement that was not intended for 20th-century minds. Somewhere the causality loop had to begin—or did it? A moebius strip has no beginning.

On the other hand, some philosophers have speculated that what has happened as a consequence of the Futurist's visit was a necessary condition to the world of 2099. That future, they have said, may have needed to avert the kind of concern about morality that has led to most of the organized violence in the world. By attacking the attempts to legislate morality, the future may have instigated a defense of it that may lead, in time, to a wiser future—or at least a future. Perhaps, some have continued, the last, great moral crusade loomed ahead like the end of the world and the Futurist's mission was to cut it off before it cut off the future.

But the only way the world will find out is to achieve the future in the only way possible. A day at a time.

The violence never surfaced, of course; the mobs dispersed; the sermons and the political diatribes died away. There was nothing to attack. A new air of reasonableness has begun to replace the old atmosphere of suspicion and accusation in international and personal relationships. People finally began to listen to what the visitor from the future had said to the Secretary General and then to the permanent members of the Security Council.

People have started to think more seriously about the riddle of the sphinx.

And they have begun to forget about ancient injuries and old hatreds and to think about the future. ♦

# The Dreyfuss Affair



Barry B. Longyear

10:08 P.M., 14 April 1865

The war was almost done. As the news of General Lee's surrender five days before continued to displace the grey numbness of four bloody years of death and destruction, the streets of Washington sank further and further into an orgy of celebration. It was true that General Joseph Johnston, commanding the last complete rebel army in the field, had yet to surrender, but the rumor had it that General Joe was in old Jeff Davis's office that very night preparing to send up the white flag. The president had been waiting all day for the news. It was just a matter of time.

Sergeant Dye, sitting guard outside Ford's Theater that night, contrasted in his mind the merry-makers on Tenth Street against how old Abe Lincoln had looked the previous hour as the president and his party had climbed down from the carriage and passed through the crowd. The tall man looked bent; his homely face had been filled with an incredible sadness. He looked less like the victor and more like the vanquished.

The sergeant shrugged his shoulders against the damp chill and the pungent odor of wood smoke and let his attention wander next door to the happy sounds coming from Tal-

Illustration by Laura and John Lakey



tavul's. He had seen the famous actor John Wilkes Booth enter the saloon a short time before. The soldier passed his tongue over his lips and contemplated how a hot rum would go down at that moment. There was nothing going on right then, and it wouldn't take but a minute. Just then, however, the actor emerged from the front of Taltavul's and stood talking with a man whose face Dye knew, the theater's costumer, Lewis Carland. A man the sergeant didn't recognize lit a pipe and joined the conversation. They were talking theater, and the sergeant felt a touch of contempt. The stage, he thought, is a silly place filled with silly people.

A fourth man came down from F Street and asked the trio the time. The man with the pipe looked into the lobby of the theater and said, "After ten." The questioner continued down the street, and Sergeant Dye recognized him as a singer at Ford's named Hess.

Drunken singing came from across Tenth Street, and the distant sounds of fireworks and band music threatened to tease Dye from his post. The sergeant was impatient for the end of the play, when he could go off duty and join the celebrants.

Hess returned and again asked the time. He explained that he was to go on just before the final scene and join two other singers in performing the new song by Professor Withers, "All Honor to Our Soldiers." Booth laughed uproariously at this comment, and Sergeant Dye concluded that the actor was quite a bit in his cups. There was no shame in that. The entire city was drunk.

From the direction of F Street came another man. He stopped and joined the conversation, concentrating his attentions on the actor. Dye recognized Captain Williams of the Washington Cavalry Police. "Mr. Booth," said the captain, gesturing toward Taltavul's, "would you do me the honor of allowing me to buy you a drink?"

Booth pulled out his pocket watch, checked the time, and shook his head. "Keene will be onstage in a minute, and I promised to take a look for her."

Another admirer approached from the direction of E Street. He stopped next to Captain Williams and seemed to study Booth for a moment. The man was clad in riding boots, as was Booth; however, he wore dress more suited to the west than to the streets of the District. He was a tall, lanky man, young and well built, with a clear face carrying few years. Beneath the brim of his western hat he had dark hair and eyes that seemed to glitter. "Wilkes Booth?" the man inquired.

The actor and his other admirers seemed highly amused at the admirer's question. It was obviously from one who had never seen the younger Booth on the boards. "I am," answered the actor, looking up at the stranger.

The tall admirer in the western outfit slowly shook his head and said, "I'll be damned. You really do look like Richard Dreyfuss." Then he pulled a Colt pistol from beneath his jacket, aimed it between Booth's eyes, and pulled the trigger.

Sergeant Dye frowned as he quickly studied the faces in the gathering crowd. He searched again and again. Before the great actor had hit the ground, his tall slayer had apparently vanished. Since he didn't want to be accused

of drinking on his post, the sergeant rethought what he had seen and decided the stranger, even as tall as he was, had managed to slip away in the confusion. "Thank God," he muttered beneath his breath. "Thank God the fiend wasn't after the president."

Z:06 P.M., 17 June 2080

Roger Alfred leaned forward in the water chair and looked expectantly at his therapist. "Did you watch the movie?"

Isa Childs returned Roger's glance with an expression that hovered somewhere between amusement and pity. "There you go again, Roger. Look how you're lying to yourself. You called it a movie. No one's used that word for a vid in over sixty years."

Roger's eyebrows went up as his face reddened. "That's not what I asked. Did you watch it? *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*; did you watch it?"

The therapist shrugged and cocked his head to one side. "Yes, I did. Last night, in fact. It was on my viddeck and, since you made such a point of it, I called it up and watched it. Very amusing period piece, if a little overlong." He leaned back in his chair, tented his fingertips, and looked over them at Roger. "That's one of the reasons why I've called you in for this extra session."

"Well?"

Childs held his hands out in a gesture of helplessness. "I have already told you that you bear a striking resemblance to Richard Dreyfuss. Nevertheless, the facts of reality are against you."

"Screw reality."

"If that's going to be your attitude, Roger, there's not much point in continuing these sessions."

"All right," muttered Roger. "Go on."

"Look at the facts, Roger. Dreyfuss was born in 1947. If you were he, you'd be a hundred and forty years old. Look at yourself. You're not even thirty yet."

"A hundred and forty-three."

The therapist's eyebrows arched slightly. "Again?"

"If I was Richard Dreyfuss I'd be a hundred and forty-three, not a hundred and forty."

"Exactly. *Close Encounters* was made over a century ago. Unless you've found the Fountain of Youth, you can't be Richard Dreyfuss and you couldn't've been in that vid."

Roger flopped back into the chair and held the bridge of his nose as the sides of the chair sloshed against his thighs. "Then why can I remember the film being shot? Why can I remember who was in it? I can remember who I kissed, who I couldn't stand. Every argument, every shining moment, every lousy single detail. Why do I remember getting the Oscar for *The Goodbye Girl*?"

"This is all public information, Roger. Your mind has processed these things and mutated them until they fit your current reality. It proves nothing. Doesn't it ever make you wonder why you only remember his early films? Why don't you remember *What About Bob?*, the Beverly Hills down and out thing, and the rest? Did you watch *What About Bob?* as I asked?"

Roger nodded, his gaze cast down. "Yeah."

"Well?"

"No, I don't remember it. Is that what you wanted to hear?"

The therapist shook his head as he air-cushioned his seat over to the window wall behind Roger and looked down upon the teeming masses of Portland, Maine, sixty-five stories below. "Look at them out there, Roger. Most of them are hitched to Hell's rocket, and most of them try to cope the best way they can. Some blot out on drugs, some do the same thing with religion, others fall into fantasy worlds and never come back. Some take their own lives, some take on the lives of those they admire to avoid having to deal with who they are themselves. There is a sad, sad world out there filled with minor Napoleons, Christs, Rambos, Mohammeds, John Waynes, Buddhas, and," he concluded as he glanced back toward Roger, "at least one Richard Dreyfuss."

It's all wrong, thought Roger. *Close Encounters*. The pieces of the film. The stuff that was left on the cutting room floor. The stuff Spielberg whacked out and more he put back in for the special edition. That incredibly boring version that was put on TV. Have I made it all up? Is this smug old fart in the chair behind me right after all?

He might be. . . .

"Isa," he began, but there was a tone beep that interrupted his comment.

"This is the important call I've been waiting for, Roger. Please excuse me," said the therapist as he touched the armrest of his chair and answered, "Yes?"

Roger could hear nothing as Isa Childs nodded and silently screened the audio from the room. He watched the therapist for a moment, then rose from his own chair, walked to the opposite window wall, and looked out upon the polluted expanses of Back Cove. The glass on the Preble Street office tower needed cleaning, and the cove was further hidden by a veil of drizzle and haze. He looked down to see the early afternoon shoppers, muggers, and druggers hurrying to get out of an increasing rain.

He frowned deeply as he thought. If it was all in his head, why did he remember Brooklyn, a place he supposedly had never been? The heartbreaks, the victories? That Oscar? If he had won it, where was the damn thing? If it was all a fantasy, then who was he? Who in the hell was Roger Alfred? He was an actor, and luckily he was doing very well in the vids. It was all that he ever wanted to do. Those familiar with Richard Dreyfuss's work, however, were always startled by the resemblance between Roger and the actor from the previous century. It was not only a physical resemblance, either. The acting styles, mannerisms, even the voices were similar.

But not exact, as the therapist had established. He had taken Roger's voiceprints together with prints from Dreyfuss's film work, and Isa had reported that the prints didn't match.

Of course, he only had Isa's word for that. Right then he didn't trust the therapist very much. It was a suspicion that had grown ever so more intense over the past year. Of course, that was simply another manifestation of his "skeptical within," according to Isa. The therapist was contradicting the reality in which he wanted to hide; hence, mistrust. And he did remember grade school, high school,

and college as Roger Alfred. All of that had been in Maine. It was the details that kept fuzzing over. He not only didn't remember his first girlfriend, he couldn't remember *any* girlfriends. He couldn't even remember his parents except as some poorly drawn stick figures. For him to be sane, the only explanation for his mush of memories had to be time travel, and there wasn't any time travel. It looked as though all that was left for him was the banana farm.

"Roger?"

His thoughts interrupted, Roger turned and looked at his therapist. Childs had finished his call and was standing. The man looked quite pale. "Is everything all right?"

His face grave, Isa Childs walked over to his desk and thumb-triggered the print lock on his center drawer. "No, Roger, I'm afraid things are quite serious."

"Do you want me to leave?"

"Not just yet." The therapist reached into his drawer, withdrew a greenish silver weird sort of pistol that seemed vaguely familiar, aimed it at Roger, and pulled the trigger. Roger felt as though a high-voltage line had been thrust into his bellybutton.

"God damn you!" he croaked.

Childs smiled sadly and said, "Congratulations, Roger. That was a very healthy response."

As Roger took a ragged step toward Childs, the room began growing dim. His skin seemed to tingle all over and he saw himself fall into the office's thick gel floor covering, but didn't feel the impact. Instead, he was carried away into the dark by a thousand invisible arms.

\* \* \*

*It was like a movie reel running in his mind's projector frame by frame.*

*Time surfers.*

*There was the wave and the stream. Wipe to get into the wave, wipe again to go back in the stream. After years in the wave, he had chosen the stream.*

*He was Richard Dreyfuss!*

*He had been in Close Encounters! He had been there for all of those movies! The memory was vague, but at the end of it, they said they had to replace him. He couldn't be Richard Dreyfuss anymore. He was needed elsewhere for another mission. Another Richard Dreyfuss would do What About Bob? and the rest.*

*Things he had done for the time wardens: things that hurt, things that killed.*

*The killing.*

*Usually, that was the job. Go back, take someone down, thereby smacking some ill-defined rogue event into line with the natural stream.*

*That had been the ultimate horror: doing terrible things and belonging nowhere or when.*

*After the last time, Ophon had given him a choice. He could stay in the timewave and continue to help with their work, or they could wipe him and place him somewhere in time, away from the wave.*

*He was sick of it all.*

*He had taken the wave.*

It became clearer as the wipe faded, restoring what there was left of his normal memory, which appeared to be full of holes. Richard Dreyfuss. His task had been noth-

ing more than to replace someone. He had been wiped and trained for that, as well. But had he been someone named X replacing someone called Richard Dreyfuss, or was he Richard Dreyfuss who had replaced an X?

*Close Encounters* had been the key. Changes had to be made to bend events in a particular direction. Sometimes, dozens of centuries in the future, there were beings from elsewhere who needed to be shown how humans regarded them, leaving aside for the moment the thousands of bug-eyed monsters from outer-space flicks that had been absorbed by humanity over the decades.

There had been only one killing on that mission, an obstinate writer named Lacey. It had been enough, though. Finally, sick of it all, Richard had chosen to go back into the stream.

Locating in the stream, however, had to be a different time. Richard Dreyfuss, or Mr. X, whoever it had been, was back in his own place, the time warden had explained.

He remembered the words, but not the warden's face.

And there was more.

Isa Childs.

There were time local liaisons who looked after this special kind of immigrant, and that's what Isa Childs did in the year 2080 for what Richard used to call the time surfers.

There was the familiar plastic smell of his therapist's air couch. Roger opened his eyes and saw the indirectly lit ceiling of Isa Childs's office.

That was it, then. At last he had achieved emotional balance. He was happy that he had been proven right about being who he thought he was, and he was quite prepared to strangle Isa Childs.

"He's awake," said Childs.

"God damn right, I'm awake, you bastard!" He tried to get up but found he was restrained around the chest, arms, wrists, and ankles. "What in the hell is this?"

Childs's face appeared above his. The therapist rolled Richard or Roger's left sleeve and pressed an inject-pac against his upper arm. It hissed, and the arm began to sting. "It's just a precaution until you completely recover from the shockspan, Roger."

"Richard," he insisted as another piece dropped into place. The shockspan. It was a gadget from the far future, even beyond Ophon's time. They were made by animated gobs of pus from another galaxy called the Gnarleys or something. "Still," he said out loud, "I really am Richard Dreyfuss. I *know* it now."

Childs faced someone else and said, "I'm afraid he's still rather confused."

"Those old D-70 wipes had some terrible side effects," remarked an old familiar voice. "The ones we use now are much better. Very short lag time, complete restoration of previous identity—"

"Do you mind?" said Roger/Richard as he twisted his head around to see Dalik Ophon, the time warden, standing next to Childs. A few more blocks dropped into place as he slumped back on the couch and pieced it together.

Confirmation.

He was from another time—several other times, actually, and after the Dreyfuss mission, he wanted off the

timewave. He wanted timestream, a local moment, and a lifetime he could call his own. But the memory wipe and implant had been not so good, and thus the insanity of the past two years had a perfectly sane explanation.

Dalik stood over him and looked down. His face was smooth beneath a shock of jet-black hair. Roger/Richard somehow remembered that Dalik Ophon was approaching two hundred years of age. Of course Ophon was from the early third millennium. Amazing, thought Roger, how quickly one can get used to reality suddenly being turned inside out.

"Roger," the time warden began, "we don't really have the time for you to work out your personal problems on the job—"

"Personal problems!" he exploded. "You're the one who had these holes burned into my brain, Dalik. Besides, I'm not on the job. I'm out, quit, finished."

The warden slowly shook his head. "All you had was some time off, Roger. As I told you before you were wiped, if we needed you again, I'd have to come and get you."

Roger/Richard frowned and thought back. It was all so murky. "I don't remember agreeing to anything like that." He rubbed his eyes and said to himself, "I don't remember getting paid for *Close Encounters*." Roger/Richard raised an eyebrow at the time warden. "What I *do* remember, turkey, is threatening to initiate an event ripple that would turn reality into a horror movie unless I was retired. That's what I remember."

Dalik Ophon held out a hand and said, "It's all quite irrelevant. We need you, and there isn't any other choice. You'll understand once it's explained to you."

"I don't get it, Dalik. I was never very good at it. I get too involved emotionally. Why do you need me?"

The time warden raised his eyebrows and nodded.

"True, you're no expert killer, Roger. However, you are incredibly lucky. Remember the mission to take out the Secret Service officer who interfered with the assassination of President Quayle? Remember how you—"

"I still want to know about Richard Dreyfuss," demanded Roger. "What about the *real* Richard Dreyfuss you keep talking about? You grabbed him once before, didn't you? Why not snatch him this time?"

"Perhaps we just did." Dalik stood there, his eyebrows raised, until he shrugged. "Actually, there is no more Richard Dreyfuss," answered Dalik. "He was never born." He nodded toward Childs. "Remove the restraints. He should be sitting up for this."

As the therapist bent to the task of opening the restraints, Roger/Richard muttered, "You geeky son of a bitch. I ought to wring your neck like a goddamn chicken. I've been in a lot of pain and coming to you for over two years! That cost one hell of a lot of money, too!"

Childs smiled as he finished opening the cuffs on Roger/Richard's ankles. "And we've achieved quite a breakthrough, haven't we?"

With a great deal of restraint, Roger/Richard refrained from kicking Isa Childs in the crotch.

\* \* \*

It was something that had always been feared. Someone with timewave access and a mission to change things

would again attempt to go back to reverse or alter some core incident, thereby sending an event ripple forward that would make the world a better place. Projections being the imprecise things they were, however, the ripple might take a turn and eliminate the future altogether.

Ever since the rogue time warden Damiel Rin took it upon himself to reverse the U.S. presidential election of 1992, the time wardens, and the world, had been suffering the consequences. Thus the absolute ban on event altering, save somehow to ameliorate the effects of the so-called "Bubba Bomb."

This time it wasn't a time warden who had slipped. Instead, it was the local time liaison for 1994, Peter Ryan. He was an unsuccessful television actor, part time autograph hound, and full time historian. He had gained access to the wave, had gone back to 1865 Washington, D.C., and fulfilled a lifelong fantasy by preventing the assassination of U.S. President Abraham Lincoln. Of course, in so doing he killed a very popular actor known to be sympathetic to the South.

"You see," said Ophon, "one Southern general hadn't surrendered his army yet. When the news reached Joe Johnston that a bunch of Yankees in Washington had celebrated Lee's surrender by murdering Johnston's favorite actor, John Wilkes Booth, it was one thing too many for him. Johnston refused to order his men to lay down their arms. Instead he ordered them into the hills as guerrillas to begin organized resistance against the Union occupation. Lee joined Johnston a few days later, and there it was."

It had made the troubles in Northern Ireland look like a barroom brawl by comparison, especially after the resistance spread to the North and West. Lincoln, his health failing, left the suppression of the resistance to then Secretary of War Stanton, who instituted a rash of harsh measures that resembled the Spanish Inquisition.

Crippled by repression and constant terrorism, the United States of America never became the home of freedom or opportunity. In fact, much of the world's wealth and power became mired in the American tarbaby by supporting one side or the other. Eventually, with the rise of the Twentieth Century dictators, the planet became economically and politically bankrupt. Two fellows named Hitler and Stalin never did come to power. The monsters who rose in their stead, however, eventually reduced the world to militaristic horror and grinding poverty.

Roger frowned and looked up at the time warden. "The event ripple; where is it? Things really suck in this time. Has it already passed?"

Dalik Ophon shook his head. "It's passing through the late 1990s right now, which is neither here nor there, because the human race became virtually extinct during the 1967 world holocaust." He held his hand out indicating the city of Portland, such as it was. "In another twelve hours or so this won't exist either. In another thirty hours, neither will even the hope of time-spanning. Once that happens, everyone loses his ticket on the ride."

Pushing himself to his feet, Roger Alfred looked warily from Dalik Ophon to Isa Childs and back to the time warden. "So, go back and waste Peter Ryan before he goes rogue, right? Cancel the event ripple?"

Dalik raised his eyebrows and cocked his head. "He's already wiped himself out, in a manner of speaking. Thanks to the ripple, he was never born, and the ripple has already passed through his local time departure point. His only existence, therefore, is in the timewave—"

"Which can't be touched by the other time surfers," interrupted Roger.

Dalik winced. "I wish you wouldn't refer to them as surfers. In any event, Peter Ryan cannot be touched unless we know where he is."

Roger held up a hand, "And the only time appearance we know about is when Ryan killed Booth."

"Exactly. Outside the front of Ford's Theater shortly after ten at night on the fourteenth of April, 1865."

"So what do you need me for? Just have one of your shooters take out Ryan before he can smoke Booth."

"We can't take the chance of frightening Booth by having a shootout in front of the theater," answered Dalik. "It's still necessary for John Wilkes Booth to assassinate President Lincoln. The only way to assure eliminating both Ryan and Lincoln is for you to impersonate Booth."

Another killing spree, thought Roger/Richard. It was everything that had caused him to take the wipe two years before. Then a thought crossed his mind. "I've seen pictures of Booth. I don't see any resemblance."

Dalik Ophon turned to Isa Childs and held out a hand. "The file, please."

"Certainly." The therapist went to his desk, picked up a screen board, and handed it to the time warden. Dalik punched in a few numbers and handed the board to Roger.

Taking the screen board, Roger Alfred looked at a picture of a man in a squat crowned hat, long coat, and baggy trousers. He was leaning his left elbow on an urn of some kind, and his legs were crossed in a cavalier pose. He had a heavy black moustache, and the face upon which that moustache hung was Richard Dreyfuss's. "I'll be damned."

Roger's head went back as one of his eyebrows arched. "Just a minute. Let me get this straight. You want *me* to kill Ryan and Lincoln?" The eyebrows crashed into a frown. "You expect *me* to assassinate Abraham Lincoln?"

"Booth as well," added the time warden. "After all, we can't have two John Wilkes Booths wandering around the president's box brandishing pistols, can we? You'll eliminate Booth and take his place, draw Ryan out and neutralize him, then dispatch Lincoln. We've made all the arrangements with the April 1865 liaison, Jason Wells. He's a detective on the city police and he can snip off any loose ends you might leave behind."

"You want *me* to assassinate Lincoln? Why in the hell don't you just give me some nails and a hammer and send me back to Golgotha to tack up Christ?"

It was quiet for a long moment; then Dalik said, "It's not like you haven't done this kind of work before." He turned toward Childs. "Is he all right? Seems a bit slow."

"He's confused. The Dreyfuss thing. He's been thoroughly obsessed by thoughts of being Richard Dreyfuss for the past two years. Of course, he's been wiped twice, as well, and as you implied, the D-70 wipes aren't exactly perfect. I'm afraid all of this is rather an abrupt change of direction for him. He might not be completely up to the task."

"We are totally out of options," answered the time warren. "We're not going to wipe him for this mission. Even so, the amount of time we have left leaves us no room at all." Ophon rubbed his chin as he studied Roger. At last he blinked and smiled sympathetically. "You'll have to snap out of it, my boy. We can't use you as Richard Dreyfuss. We need you as John Wilkes Booth, and soon." He pointed at the spot on Roger's arm where the inject-pac had been applied. "The injection contains all of the personality data and information on Booth, and it should be taking effect in another minute or two."

"You said you weren't going to wipe me for this."

"We're not. The data shot is in addition to your normal memory, not in place of it."

Great, thought Roger/Richard. In another two minutes I'll be John Wilkes/Roger/Richard.

Dalik Ophon retrieved his screen board file and pointed toward a door in the rear of Childs's office. That was, Roger realized, where Childs kept his time stage. "Back into the timewave, Roger. None of us have much time left at all."

9:29 P. M., 14 April 1865

The world of the theater thrilled John Miles, the son of slaves. Since he was not allowed to perform on stage at Ford's, and certainly could not sit in the audience, he fed off the actors by sitting high in the flies above and behind the stage, among the suspended sets and the smells of hot gaslights and cigar smoke, watching the players. There was little to like in the comedy being performed, but the relative merits of Tom Taylor's *Our American Cousin* did not concern John Miles one bit. It was the laughter of the audience that captivated him. If he could trade his life for just one night upon such a stage he knew he would do it.

The applause and cheers from the audience as the president's party made its way through the dressing circle to his box had been quite exciting, despite the odd disappointed grumble that the real hero of the moment, General Grant, had not been with the president, as advertised.

From where he sat, Miles could not see the president's box, which was all right with him. His real heroes were the actors, and those he could see. As the beautiful Laura Keane prepared to make an entrance, Miles heard a sound coming from the rear of the theater. He turned and looked down through the tall cathedral window at the alley below. His heart almost stopped. Although he was not in the cast of tonight's performance, the famous actor John Wilkes Booth was standing in the alley looking as though he was waiting for something. The way he patted his coat pocket and jerked his head around at every little sound made him look very nervous. Well, it was well known the actor drank. That sort became nervous sooner or later. Too bad, really. He was such a fine performer.

It was dark, only the one gaslight illuminating the alley. It was chilly and a bit hazy as the wood smoke from countless homes mixed with the damp air.

The sounds of a horse picking its way through the dark alley made John Miles strain to see who the actor had been waiting for. The animal's hooves rang on the stones. In a

moment the mare and its rider came into the light. Miles didn't notice as his lower jaw fell open. The rider was John Wilkes Booth! They were *both* John Wilkes Booth!

The pedestrian Booth reached within his coat pocket and pulled out a strange-looking weapon that resembled a green pistol grip attached to a silver comb. At the same moment the mare reared and, quick as a shot, the mounted Booth pulled a knife from beneath his coat and threw it, striking the blade deep into the other's heart.

John Miles scrambled down the stairs, turned a corner, and slammed into one of the stagehands, Ned Spangler. "Watch it, boy," Spangler growled.

"Mr. Spangler," puffed John, "out in back. Somebody tried to kill Mr. Booth." His eyebrows went up when he recalled which one he had originally identified as the actor. "Maybe Mr. Booth's the one who got killed."

Spangler, a skeptical look on his face, cocked his head toward the stage door. "C'mon. Let's see what you got stuck in your eye."

Miles followed Spangler out the door into the alley. "By Jesus!" exclaimed the stagehand. "Mr. Booth, sir, whatever happened?" He turned and glared at Miles. "Hold Mr. Booth's horse."

John Miles got around Spangler so he could at last see. The Booth who had been mounted on the horse, the reins still in his hands, was turning the other over with the toe of his boot. The dead man wore the exact same outfit as the live one, down to the highly polished spurs. Without removing his gaze from the corpse, the actor handed John Miles the reins to his horse and answered, "Damned if I know, Ned." He appeared to be almost in shock.

He squatted down to remove his knife from the dead man's chest, but paused as something seemed to catch his eye. He reached out his right hand and picked at the corpse's thick black moustache, identical to the actor's. "Will you look at this?" He tore the artificial moustache from the corpse's lip and held the object out to Spangler and Miles. "What in the devil was he after?"

"Perhaps, sir, we might instead ask what you've been up to tonight." Miles turned his head back toward the stage door to see a man in his fifties dressed neatly in a brown suit and boots. He had a derby on, its brim almost covering his eyes.

Booth stood up, red-faced, and answered hotly, "Make yourself clear, sir!"

The man extended the index finger of his right hand, placed it beneath the brim of his derby, and pushed the hat to the back of his head. "Detective Jason Wells, Mr. Booth, of the Washington Police. I was just wondering why a famous person such as yourself is skulking around a dark alley at this hour."

Although he feigned anger, the actor's face went pale. "I was *not* skulking. I pick up my mail at Ford's, Detective Wells, and that is why I am here right now. Everybody knows me here. Ask Ned. Ask John." He pointed down at the corpse. "Instead, you should be concerned with this one. As I rode up, this fellow was waiting and tried to kill me."

"That's right, sir," said John Miles, pointing at the rear of the theater. "I saw him from up in that window. He



had a gun, just like Mr. Booth said. It was all green and silver. Never seen anything like it."

Detective Wells squatted next to the body, examined it, and then placed two fingers across its upper lip. "You know, Mr. Booth, with a moustache, this fellow could be your twin." Booth didn't respond, and the detective rolled the man's torso to the left far enough to pull his arm from beneath his back. Miles leaned over and saw that the curious weapon he had described was still clutched in the man's hand. "What is that, sir? What kind of gun?"

"As a matter of fact," answered the detective, "it's a Kaddik Shockspan."

"I never saw anything like it."

The policeman put the weapon in his pocket. "The Gnarmys make them."

"Gnarmys?" repeated Booth. "Is that a British manufacturer?"

"No," answered Wells. "The Gnarmys are quite a bit further away than that."

There was an uproarious laugh from the audience inside the theater, and Ned Spangler said to the detective, "I got to go and help change a set. It'll be my job if I miss the cue. I'll be back in a couple of minutes."

Wells shook his head, his gaze on the corpse's face. "No need to come back. This looks pretty clear-cut."

As Spangler ran for the stage door, Booth held out a hand and asked, "Do you need me to make a report?"

"No, Mr. Booth." The detective leveled a cold-eyed gaze at the actor. "You are free to enter the theater and complete your business."

Miles saw a haunted look in the actor's eyes as he barely shook his head and said, "No. Not tonight. This has all been rather upsetting."

"I bet," said the detective, a wry smile on his lips.

Booth took the reins from John Miles without looking at him, mounted his horse, and guided it along the alley toward F Street. As soon as horse and rider were out of sight, John could hear the sounds of the animal breaking into a gallop.

"You can go too," Wells said to John.

"Oh, I don't need to be anywhere, Detective Wells, sir."

"Well, son, maybe you ought to go someplace else. I've got work to do and I don't need any spectators."

John felt his face growing hot. "Well, sir, maybe you ought to know that John Miles is a free man who is entitled to stand on any street corner or alley in this whole city, and nobody can tell him to move if he don't want to. They just fought a war about that, didn't you hear?" Old habits die hard, and John threw in a belated "Sir" at the end of his speech.

The detective stood, pressed his hands against the small of his back, and stretched. "Of course, you're right, son. That's what the war's about." He removed his hands from his back, pulled back his coat, and withdrew from his belt a weapon identical to the one he had taken from the corpse. One moment the detective was aiming the silver comb end of the thing at John, and the next both detective and mysterious corpse had vanished. In the dust at John Miles's feet there was nothing left but some footprints and a false moustache.

He bent over, picked up the moustache, studied it, and put it in his shirt pocket, vowing never to reveal it to a single soul what had happened at the rear of Ford's Theater that night. There were already plenty of people who thought he was crazy because he wanted to be a stage actor. There would be no point in giving them ammunition. A profound frown weighing down his brow, John made it back into the flies just in time to hear Mr. Hess sing the new song, "All Honor to Our Soldiers."

\* \* \*

"The event ripple has gone past your local time departure point, Roger. That's why we had to bring you forward for another try." Dalik Ophon was standing next to a woman clad in combat utilities, Shalla Inam, local time liaison for A.D. 2294. They stood in the tower of the Eastern Army Defense Center. Roger Alfred turned and looked through the observation port across the Potomac River. There was a great black obelisk rising from the rubble of Arlington that was the nerve center for the region's missile defense grid. Several smoking blocks of rubble on both sides of the river testified to the imperfections of the system.

The general data screens had briefed them. The Western and Southern armies, under the command of General Julio Diaz, were moving against Harrisonburg, a hundred miles to the southwest. All projections showed the Eastern Army defenses crumbling within a matter of days. Everyone Roger could see on 23rd Street below was armed. Children were filling and stacking sandbags to protect the government defense positions.

Roger turned and faced Dalik. "I was feeling pretty terrible about fouling up the mission until I was brought here. Are you telling me this is the future we want to protect?"

"Life isn't all sweetness and light, Roger," Dalik Ophon responded as he came up and joined him in front of the armored observation port. "In another two years Field Marshal Angus will reestablish the North American Parliament in Montreal, the treaties between the east, west, north, and south will be signed and the prime minister will lead North America to crush the dictator of the Latin American Union. Then . . . things get better. It isn't perfect, Roger, but it is the future that produced the timewave generator several hundred years later. Once the ripple reaches there, our scientists have some doubt about our continued existence, even in the timewave."

"What about the new ripple? What are the projections now when neither Booth nor Lincoln dies?"

Dalik nodded. "I must admit things were—were improved. The extinction of the human race was put off for an additional twenty-six years."

"What? With Lincoln left alive and Reconstruction—"

"In 1869, at the beginning of his third term in office, Lincoln went quite insane. Actually, it had been going on long before that. It only became obvious in '69. By then, however, Lincoln was under the power of a band of unscrupulous manipulators who had sacked the South, and invaded Canada under the pretext of joining Alaska to the motherland. Britain came in, of course, and the world chose up sides, with fairly similar results to the Booth-Dies-Lincoln-Lives scenario."

As Roger raised his gaze and let it settle on the ruins of

the Lincoln Memorial, he touched the fingers of one hand to his chest. "That knife, Dalik; I just wasn't prepared."

"You knew he was an expert with knife, foil, and gun."

"I just didn't realize what being an expert with a knife meant. He must have been twenty-five feet away. Booth couldn't have hit my heart more to the center if he'd been a surgeon with a scalpel." He glanced at the time warden. "I go back for another try, right?"

"Of course."

Roger nodded and raised an eyebrow at Ophon. "Booth never shodded at the front of the theater, right? That means Ryan's been tipped off."

"Correct. Our observers couldn't spot him anywhere on Tenth Street. We must assume he's onto us. He'll probably move forward to take Booth out at an earlier time. We're sending you in on the evening of the thirteenth. We only know Booth's location for certain during the night of the thirteenth and at several points the day of the fourteenth. The event ripple is accelerating. In linear time we only have perhaps twenty-eight hours before time span local is eliminated. Hence, we have to move now."

"What if Ryan goes back to a scheduled performance. Booth was in a few years earlier and takes him out then?"

"You were in the timestream when Pebbek proposed his event vacuum theory. In short, if there was no Booth, events would probably be so altered that Lincoln might not have become president, or if he did the times would likely produce another Booth. Another assassin would be wrung from the spatiotemporal pulp, as it were."

"Theory, probably, likely—"

"As lame as it sounds to you, Roger, within certain limits Pebbek's theory works as advertised. Certainly Ryan can't afford to disregard it. He knows we won't. Therefore, we can count on Ryan attempting to get to Booth at the National Hotel the night of the thirteenth. You have to get there first—"

"I know," interrupted Roger. "Take out Booth, kill Ryan, then assassinate the president."

"Don't forget the fellow in the alley behind Ford's Theater. He's still going to be there."

"What fellow . . . you mean *me*? I have to take out *myself*?" Dalik allowed the silence in the room to answer Roger's question. "You know, Dalik, it's coming back to me now why I quit on you the last time." He glared at the impassive face of the local time liaison, Shalla Inam. "Why doesn't she ever say anything?"

"She doesn't know any English."

"I thought you said she's an officer in the Eastern Army." Dalik smiled sadly. "Oh, you thought . . ." He shrugged and held out his hands. "The Eastern Army comes from the East, Roger, not from New Jersey."

"I don't want to hear about it," muttered Roger as he headed toward the back room where Shalla Inam kept her time stage.

11:03 P.M., 13 April 1865

"Dalik Ophon and his crowd've managed to disable Ryan's time stage," said Detective Wells as the pair stood in front of the National. Despite the occasional shadow, the boom

and flash of fireworks combined with the laughter and singing on the street, giving a strange, festive flavor to the fear in Roger's mouth. He was not made up as Booth to avoid attracting attention, although he did draw an occasional questioning look.

Roger frowned as he fought down the renewed conviction that he was Richard Dreyfuss, tricked, manipulated, lied to, and bullied into this role of all roles. He rubbed his eyes and asked, "So, what does that do for us? I'm sure Ryan arranged something before Dalik pulled the plug."

The detective nodded in agreement. "Most likely. What it means, though, is that we only have to take care of it this one time. Ryan doesn't have any more tries."

"Neither do we," replied Roger, his voice flat and hostile. "Wells, how does someone from 1865 get approached to be a local time liaison?"

The large man smiled. "It was a book, a work of adventure fiction, called *Time Enough*. I was captivated by it, and when the advertisement in the back of the book said the names of more such works were available simply by sending in my name and address, I did so."

"And not long after, there came Dalik Ophon knocking on your door. So he lied to you, too."

"How so? I have gotten more books."

Roger shook his head. "No, man, you don't get it. The time warden's a slimeball, every move has a hidden agenda. He's up to his eyeballs twisting, turning, manipulating people and events to get what he wants."

Jason Wells held a hand out toward the hotel. "Isn't that what we're doing?"

"Sure," replied Roger sarcastically. "Right."

The detective scratched his chin for a moment and frowned. "Look, Mr. Dreyfuss—"

"Alfred," corrected Roger. "I think."

"You said—"

"I know what I said. What were you going to ask?"

Jason Wells shrugged and held out his hands. "Very well. If you don't like this work, why do you do it?"

"I don't really. I quit on Dalik two years ago." Roger began waving a hand to try to pin down for the detective where "two years ago" was located, but Wells waved aside the explanation. "Okay, Dalik put the guilt on me. 'Roger, the world's going to end if you don't go back and do the mission.' Besides, I was very confused."

"You're not confused now, are you?"

Roger sneered. "I still am, but that's not the point. It's personal now. That bastard Booth *killed* me!"

Wells turned then and Roger looked to see what had drawn the man's attention. A bellhop, his bulk forced into an uncomfortably tight blue uniform, complete with triple rows of bright shiny buttons down his chest and a pillbox cap on his head, was signaling from the door. Wells nodded back, and the bellhop returned inside.

"That's my man, Groves," said the detective. "Booth is in his room and alone. I have three men posted on his floor. Whatever happens, you'll be alone in there. Are you going to take him with the shockspan?"

Roger nodded. "I can use that through a door if I have to. I'm certainly not going to duel with him with pistols or knives."

"Very wise." He nodded his head toward the gaslighted doors of the National. "It's time. Ask the desk for your key. Your room is right across the hallway from Booth's. Your key will fit Booth's lock, as well."

"My key? What name?"

"Your name." The detective raised his eyebrows and thrust his hands into his coat pockets. "Well, it *was* your name. I'm sorry. Ask for Richard Dreyfuss's key."

\* \* \*

His throat dry, his makeup as John Wilkes Booth complete, Roger left his room and stood outside Booth's door and lifted his left hand. His right hand held the grip of his shockspan, the weapon set on kill. He took a breath, let it escape, and gave the door a quick double rap.

"Yes?" boomed the actor's voice from the other side of the door.

"Fresh pillow, sir."

"It's about time. I can't imagine what possessed the maid to take the bed's pillow in the first place." The door opened and Booth stood there, his suspenders hanging from his waist, his thick dark eyebrows raised. "Well?"

Roger raised the shockspan. Booth twisted and sprang to one side as Roger pulled the trigger, catching only the lower left quadrant of his target. The actor was dragging his dead leg as he reached for his coat hanging from the back of a chair. Roger fired twice more and watched as John Wilkes Booth fell to the floor like a load of wet wash.

Feeling faint, Roger closed the door behind him, went to the edge of the bed, and sat down, for some reason thinking about the movie *Jaws* and Martha's Vineyard, wishing he were there and back then.

Killing Booth, he realized, hadn't exorcised his personal demon. It was Ryan who needed to be killed. He was the one who had started this ball rolling.

Roger looked around the room, a chill running through his body. At any point over the next twenty-three hours Ryan could strike. He already knew one place where he would have to make a try: in front of the theater where he had killed Booth before. How many more tries had Ryan managed before Dalik Ophon managed to cut him off from the timewave? One? Five? A hundred and five? There was also the small matter of his own attempt to kill himself at the rear of the theater.

There was a bottle of brandy on the room's dresser. Roger eyed it as he tried to make a decision between the brandy or setting his shockspan on mild stun and shooting himself in the head. Either way, it was a quick way to escape the noise in his head and get some sleep.

There was a knock at the door followed by Wells's familiar voice calling, "Maid service."

Roger stood, went to the door, and opened it. Behind the detective were two of his minions. They walked past Roger, picked up John Wilkes Booth's body, and hurried out the door. "We'll be keeping an eye on you all night, Rich—Roger," said Jason Wells. "Get some sleep." He held out a feather pillow and left as Roger took it.

After closing the door, Roger threw the pillow on the bed and, fully clothed, dropped onto the bed and closed his eyes, strains of Simon and Garfunkel singing the hey Mrs. Robinson song threading into his dreams.

Roger shivered in the cool night air as he turned the horse onto F Street and rode toward the opening to the alley. Every nerve was strung to its limit. He had kept all of Booth's appointments that day. It had been necessary to do so to keep the bait alive for Ryan. The plan had been to keep everything as close to the known facts as possible. Who knew what consequences might accrue if someone's life took on a different spin because Booth didn't get his hair cut at 8:30, or was there in his room when his drunken friend, Michael O'Laughlin, called, or was himself sober at the wrong moment.

At eleven he had walked to Ford's to pick up his mail and met there with Henry Clay Ford and the stage carpenter, James Gifford. There was where Booth was supposed to have learned that President Lincoln would be attending the performance that night with General Grant.

Later, he was there on E Street when James Ford, his buggy loaded with bunting to decorate Lincoln's box, stopped to have a chat. From there he had gone to Howard's Stable on Seventh, paid his bill, and arranged to have his one-eyed roan delivered to the small stable behind Ford's Theater. Then he went across the Mall to Humphrey's Stable and ordered that a horse be saddled and waiting for him at four o'clock. As Booth was known to have said, Roger repeated, "I'll be back," and, as difficult as it was, he said it without an Austrian accent.

Back at the National he dressed, putting on his boots, spurs, his black suit and hat. He stuck the familiar long-sheathed knife into his belt at his left side, and into his pockets he placed a compass, his timepiece, a gimlet, and a small brass derringer.

After dressing, he went to Herndon House, met with Lewis Paine, and discussed the plans. Paine, if he could gather enough wit, was to make his way to Secretary of State Seward's house and dispatch the sick old man. After picking up his horse at four, he rode up Sixth Street to the Avenue and rode Pennsylvania to E Street, where he tied the animal to a hitching post at Grover's Theater, went to Deery's Tavern upstairs, and pretended to swill brandy. Then he went down to the manager's office, which was empty, and took a facsimile of Booth's letter to the *National Intelligencer*, glanced over it, and sealed it. Then, still looking over his shoulder for Peter Ryan, he went to Ford's.

At Ford's Theater he talked with an actor named Maddox, and then rode off in the direction of Pennsylvania Avenue. On Fourteenth Street he met John Matthews, another actor whom Booth had once tried to enlist in one of his conspiracies against the President. Matthews had refused. Roger shook the man's hand, as prescribed, and left him with the letter to deliver to the *Intelligencer* before noon the next day.

There was the chance passing of General Grant's carriage on Fifteenth Street, and the subsequent conversation with a soldier confirming that it was Grant and that the general was on his way to New Jersey. A little later he met with George Atzerodt and discussed with the drunken buffoon his plans to kill Vice President Johnson. Atze-

rod whined, cried, and generally made Roger Alfred wonder if there was anyone in the conspiracy who wasn't on the sauce.

In the alley at Ford's he invited Ned Spangler, James Maddox, and Jacob Ritterspaugh to Taltavul's for a drink, left them there with a bottle, and returned to the empty theater to prepare Lincoln's box for the assassination. It was in the silence of the theater, after he had carved out the plaster for the doorjamb, and while he was making the hole in the door with the gimlet, that he thought he heard a noise. It turned out to be nothing but a cat, but it had taken Roger a full five minutes before he could complete the observation hole and get out of there and go back to the National for a rest.

The clerk at the desk looked like Peter Ryan. Several persons along the streets had looked like him. Even one of the bellhops. At eight, Roger met with Atzerdott, Herold, and Paine to discuss final plans. As they sat talking on horseback, the surrounding air reeked with alcohol, causing Roger to wonder what shape the world would've taken had the first time warden gone back and rendered extinct the species of bugs that ate sugar and excreted alcohol. That thought still teased his mind as he rode the mare down the alley, past the Negro shanties, to face himself.

He gathered his thoughts quickly because, although the self behind the theater was no John Wilkes Booth, he did have a shockspan and he was a killer. Taking no chances, he had his own shockspan—actually the *same* shockspan—ready in one hand, the reins in the other.

There were so many things crowding his mind. Why hadn't Ryan struck? Was he counting on his original appearance in front of the theater to take care of things by itself? That didn't seem likely. Ryan had to know they'd be prepared for him this run.

"One killing at a time," he muttered as the glow from the gaslight appeared ahead. Suddenly he heard footsteps in the shadows. "Who's there?" demanded Roger as he reined in his mount, lifted his weapon, and aimed it in the direction of the sounds. After a minute staring into the darkness, Roger pressed his knees against the mare's sides and turned his attention toward the next task. In a moment the other Roger, costumed and made up as John Wilkes Booth, came into view. He was reaching for his shockspan as Roger lifted his and sent a lethal charge into his own body. As the Roger beneath the gaslight dropped, the one on the horse felt something within himself die as well.

Two figures came rushing out of the darkness of the E Street end of the alley and bent over the body. It was Detective Wells and one of his men. Roger dismounted and looked up at the tall window through which the historical John Miles had seen everything.

"I got someone to send Miles on an errand," said Wells. The detective gestured to his companion. "Let's get going. I don't fancy trying to explain all this to myself." He glanced at Roger and said, "Good luck." Then the two men and their corpse were gone.

Roger took a deep breath and called out, "Spangler!"

In a moment Ned Spangler came rushing out. "What is it, Mr. Booth?"

"Can you hold my horse for me? I won't be very long."

"I can't, Mr. Booth. I got me just too much to do."

"Is there anyone else in there?"

"John Miles was sent off on an errand." Spangler held up a finger in a classic eureka pose. "I know. Johnny Peanut. He don't have anything to do until the play's over."

As Ned ran through the stage door, Roger wondered if Johnny Peanut would turn out to be a tall killer named Peter Ryan. He turned out to be a squat fellow whose main ambitions in life appeared to be filth and liquor. He supported both by lighting the gaslights in the theater before performances and extinguishing them afterward. He took the reins of the mare and Roger entered the theater, removing his gloves. He nodded and grinned pleasantly to several fellow actors, and asked one if he could cross the stage behind the set. The actor shook his head and pointed toward the access tunnel that ran beneath the stage.

Roger stood for a moment in the wings and tried to see the president's box through the haze. He couldn't see anything, and a utility man came up beside him and asked, "Is there something you want, Mr. Booth?"

"No. I was just wondering if I could cross behind the set. I want to get to the other side."

"No, Mr. Booth. The dairy scene is on. You'll have to go under the stage."

Roger headed for the passage, and once he was beneath the boards, he could hear the actors moving about, the mumble of their lines, the laughs from the audience. In a flash he was in the side alley leading to Tenth Street. He opened the alley door and peered to his right. There, beneath the gaslights, sat a lone soldier in a chair. He nodded at the man, turned, and entered Taltavul's saloon. There he ordered a bottle of whiskey and water from Peter Taltavul, and listened as the room full of drunks toasted Union, Columbia, Grant, Lincoln, and Peter Taltavul's bald spot.

At one point one of the drunks said to Roger, "You'll never be the actor your father was."

Even though the barb was directed at John Wilkes Booth and not Roger, still Roger had an urge to ask the red-nosed souse if he would like Roger to stick his hand down his throat, grab his asshole and yank him inside out. He was a little on edge. But, there was a script.

"When I leave the stage," quoted Roger, "I will be the most famous man in America."

10:08 P.M., 14 April 1865

Sergeant Dye shrugged his shoulders against the damp chill and the pungent odor of wood smoke and let his attention wander next door to the happy sounds coming from Taltavul's. He had seen the famous actor John Wilkes Booth enter the saloon a short time before. The soldier passed his tongue over his lips and contemplated how a hot rum would go down at that moment. There was nothing going on right then, and it wouldn't take but a minute. Just then, however, the actor emerged from the front of Taltavul's and stood talking with a man whose face Dye knew, the theater's costumer, Lewis Carland. A man the sergeant didn't recognize lit a pipe and joined the conversation. They were talking theater, and the sergeant felt a

touch of contempt. The stage, he thought, is a silly place filled with silly people.

A fourth man came down from F Street and asked the trio the time. The man with the pipe looked into the lobby of the theater and said, "After ten." The questioner continued down the street, and Sergeant Dye recognized him as a singer at Ford's named Hess.

Drunken singing came from across Tenth Street, and the distant sounds of fireworks and band music threatened to tease Dye from his post. The sergeant was impatient for the end of the play, when he could go off duty and join the celebrants.

Hess returned and again asked the time. He explained that he was to go on just before the final scene and join two other singers in performing the new song by Professor Withers, "All Honor to Our Soldiers." Booth laughed uproariously at this comment, and Sergeant Dye concluded that the actor was quite a bit in his cups, although his eyes seemed very wary. There was no shame in being drunk. The entire city was drunk.

From the direction of F Street came another man. He stopped and joined the conversation, concentrating his attentions on the actor. Dye recognized Captain Williams of the Washington Cavalry Police. "Mr. Booth," said the captain, gesturing toward Taltavul's, "would you do me the honor of allowing me to buy you a drink?"

Booth pulled out his pocket watch, checked the time, and shook his head. "Keene will be onstage in a minute, and I promised to take a look for her." The actor made a complete turn as he checked around himself, looking for someone.

Another admirer approached from the direction of E Street. He stopped next to Captain Williams and seemed to study Booth for a moment. The man was clad in riding boots, as was Booth; however, he wore dress more suited to the west than to the streets of the District. He was a tall, lanky man, young and well built, with a clear face carrying few years. Beneath the brim of his western hat he had dark hair and eyes that seemed to glitter. "Wilkes Booth?" the man inquired.

Everyone but the actor seemed highly amused at the admirer's question. It was obviously from one who had never seen the younger Booth on the boards. "I am," answered the actor, looking up at the stranger.

The tall admirer in the western outfit slowly shook his head and said, "I'll be damned. You really do look like Richard Dreyfuss." Then he began to pull a weapon from beneath his jacket. Booth shouted to his companions, "He has a gun!"

Captain Williams and Dye wrestled the man to the ground, and the actor took a swing and knocked the man senseless. With the would-be brigand limp on the ground, a small crowd seemed to gather. One of the men was a large man in a derby hat. "I'm Detective Wells, Washington Police. What's going on here?"

There were hurried, disjointed descriptions, and while the talking was going on, the detective fished a strange, green-handled weapon from the stranger's pocket and placed it into his own. After the detective was again standing, Sergeant Dye could've sworn that in a low voice he

said to the actor, "That was easy." Getting no response, the detective asked, "You killed yourself. Why didn't you kill him?"

John Wilkes Booth simply shook his head and went into the main entrance of the theater.

\* \* \*

Lincoln had to be taken out with the derringer. In 1865, death by shockspan would leave too many unanswered questions. It had to be Lincoln dead, by the hand of John Wilkes Booth, and in a manner possible given the times. After walking quietly around the spectators in the darkened dress circle adjoining the presidential box, Roger stood before the empty chair where the president's guard was supposed to be sitting. According to the data shot, the guard was long gone and would be no trouble. There was a huge laugh from the audience, and Roger opened the door and slipped in. There was one more door to go through to get to the president, and Roger could see a spot of dim light through the gimlet hole he had made.

Picking up the pine plank he had hidden, he held one end against the inside of the door and shoved the other end into the hole he had made in the plaster. Once the outer door had been secured, he went to the door to box number seven and peered through the hole. The president was seated in his rocking chair, his wife sitting to his right. To her right, almost facing the door to the box, were an officer, Henry Rathbone, and his fiancée, Clara Harris.

Rathbone would have to be watched, Roger reminded himself. He was the one whom Booth had had to stab to get free of the box after shooting the president.

President Lincoln was closest to the door, and Roger watched the back of the man's head, wishing he could see the face. Time becomes a joke to those who spend too much time in the timewave, and history had become, to Roger, nothing but a vast video library playable in extreme virtual reality. Still, from somewhere deep inside himself, he had a great respect—a deep reverence—for the man he was supposed to kill. His tongue passed over dry lips as he doubted if he could pull the trigger.

At the sound of someone brushing against the outer door, Roger bolted upright and turned. It was Ryan, he thought. It had to be. The doorknob was turned, but the pine jamb held the door shut fast. The doorknob stopped turning, and there was a long silence from that direction. From the direction of the stage, however, came the start of the assassin's cue lines. The actress playing Mrs. Mountchessington said to her daughter, "Augusta, to your room!"

"Yes, ma," replied Augusta. "The nasty beast!"

Soon there would be no one left on stage save Harry Hawk, playing the part of Mr. Trenchard, and Harry Hawk was no match for a man brandishing a knife. The way to freedom would be clear. Roger would shoot Lincoln and would probably have to cut Major Rathbone. Then it was a twelve-foot jump to the stage and out the back door to where Johnny Peanut was holding his mare. It stunned Roger how simple the whole thing had been. One bold man with a knife and a single-shot pistol had killed the president, made it to the stage, gave a quick speech (*Sic semper tyrannis*) according to some accounts, stymied an entire audience, and exited stage right on a broken ankle.



"I am aware, Mr. Trenchard," said the character of Mrs. Mountchessington, "that you are not used to the manners of a good soc—"

Roger peered again through the gimlet hole, watched the back of the president's head hardly moving, then heard Henry Hawk say, "Don't know the manners of a good society, eh?"

That was *the* cue line. With the derringer in his hand, he opened the door, stepped into the box, and came up behind the president as Henry Hawk delivered the big laugh line of the night, "Wal, I guess I know enough to turn you inside out, you sockdologizing old man-trap!"

As the audience roared, Roger lifted the derringer and watched in horror as the president stood and faced him, a Colt pistol in his hand. "The name's Ryan," said the president just as he fired from the waist, blowing a sizeable hole through Roger's heart.

Somehow he was glad he had failed. As Roger went down, the blackness coming over him, he vaguely heard the derringer fire. In a swim of faded sounds, a high-pitched woman's voice screamed, "Dear God! They've shot Mrs. Lincoln!"

3:04 P.M., 26 June 2117

When Roger opened his eyes, Abraham Lincoln was looking down at him. Lincoln smiled and removed both wart and beard, revealing the face of Peter Ryan. "I think he's awake, Dalik."

"What's he doing here?" croaked Roger.

Dalik Ophon, Isa Childs, and Jason Wells came around the heated gel-couch and looked down at Roger. "How are you feeling?" asked the time warden.

Roger scowled as he sat up. "I feel like I failed and the universe is about to come to an end, that's how I feel." He nodded toward Ryan. "What's he doing here?"

"He's on our side now," said Jason Wells as he lowered his bulk into a puff chair.

"You mean he's out to kill himself?"

"No," answered Roger. "Things have changed a bit."

"Changed?" Roger looked at Isa Childs. "Changed how?"

His former therapist held out a hand toward a window wall. "Have a look."

Roger gingerly touched where both knife and bullet had, in other realities, entered his chest and stopped his heart. Getting to his feet, he walked to the window wall and looked down upon an enormous park that seemed to cover the land as far as the eye could see. In the distance, Roger could see several gleaming spires rising above the trees. There were two other structures, as well. The Capitol and the Washington Monument. Down below sleek silent vehicles streaked along a local viaduct.

"When is this?"

"2117," answered Ryan.

"June," added the time warden.

Roger turned and held out his hands. "I don't get it. The event ripple should've passed here hours ago, killing everyone."

"It did," answered Dalik. "Several of them, in fact. This is the Lincoln-Lives-Mary-Todd-Lincoln-Dies scenario."

"When you went down," said Ryan," your derringer went off and killed the first lady. You wouldn't believe how the press suddenly loved her once she had a slug in her head."

"Okay," said Roger as he faced Peter Ryan. "Let's have whatever it is you clowns are busting to say. Spit it out. Where was Lincoln during the play?"

"He was on his way south by train to personally accept the surrender of General Joseph Johnston."

"Our boy Ryan entered the stream back in '64," said Wells, "and worked his way into being a double for Lincoln for certain kinds of functions."

"So, what's going on here?" demanded Roger. "Lincoln goes insane, right, and the world goes to hell?"

"No," answered Dalik. "It seems that Lincoln became almost a god, he was held in such reverence. He held office for three more terms, and his son Robert became president after him."

"Lincoln lived," said Ryan with great satisfaction. "The South was rebuilt. Freedom, peace, education, and prosperity. Eventually there was no underclass. By popular acclaim the presidential title became hereditary, making the Lincolns our royal family. Eventually it became intermarried with the European, Eastern, and Asian royal families, and the world is what you see now: a stable population of about two billion, no war, no poverty, no unemployment, a worldwide realization of the American Dream."

Roger frowned as he slowly shook his head. "I don't get it," said Roger. "I thought Lincoln went stark raving gibbers in '69—"

"His wife was what drove him over the edge," said Dalik. "Mary Todd Lincoln had been quite mad since the death of her son William in 1862. If she had remained alive, she would've driven the president mad, as well. Your killing the first lady has made the world what it is today. As I once told you, Roger, you're not very good at this, but you are incredibly lucky."

"What do you mean? Aren't we going back? Set things right?"

"There's nothing to set right. Reality is what it is, and it contains no provisions for time-spanning. We only had time enough to get us inserted into the stream here before the timewave was eliminated altogether. We're all in the stream now."

With a great weariness, Roger again looked through the window wall at Washington. It would take time to get used to it all. The new time, the new reality. He was almost afraid to ask about Hollywood and *Close Encounters*. Before he could, however, Peter Ryan stood beside him and held out a pen and a pad of paper. "What's that?"

"I just wanted to ask you for your autograph."

"What?"

"You are Richard Dreyfuss, aren't you? I'm certain of it. If I can get your autograph, I'll be the only one in the world who has one."

"Dreyfuss wasn't born into this reality," explained Isa. "No *Close Encounters*; no Oscar, no *What About Bob?*"

Roger glanced at the time warden, then let his gaze drift to Peter Ryan's face. "If I *am* Richard Dreyfuss," said Roger, "I don't give autographs." ♦

# In the Distance, and Ahead in Time



George Zebrowski

"And openly I pledged my heart  
to the grave and suffering land,  
and often in the consecrated night,  
I promised to love her faithfully  
until death, unafraid, with her  
heavy burden of fatality, and  
never to despise a single one of  
her enigmas. Thus did I join  
myself to her with a mortal cord."

—Hölderlin,  
*The Death of Empedocles*

1

"How big did they say it is?"  
Alan asked as he looked up at  
the new star in the night sky.

"Fifty clicks across," Gemma  
said, feeling the wonder of it  
take hold of her again. "A whole  
city wrapped around an asteroid  
core! Just think, Alan, they're  
people from Old Earth, like us.  
They'll help us."

"No." He shook his head.  
"Not like us at all, so why  
should they help us?"

Her brother's disapproval of  
her reaction to the visit wor-  
ried her, but she was sure he  
would change his mind when  
he understood how the habitat  
would benefit the colony.

"What kind of people lock  
themselves up like that," he  
went on contemptuously, "hid-  
ing themselves away from sun-  
light, generation after genera-  
tion?"

Illustration by Bob Eggleton

"It's not like that at all," Gemma said softly. "The number of shells going down to the asteroid core must give them at least half the land area of a planet the size of Earth, and all of it usable."

"Really? How would you know that?"

"Just calculate the area of the inside surface of a sphere and multiply that by the number of shells within shells, allowing for decrease in size toward the core."

She couldn't see his face clearly in the starlight, but knew that he was looking at her with that slightly contemptuous look he put on whenever she knew something he didn't. "And I suppose you'll tell me they farm it," he said.

"They have what farms do."

"What do you know about it?"

"It's all in the history books," she replied, and listened to the awkward silence that was his frequent way of reproaching her. You could be doing more work around the farm, instead of wasting your time reading old books. He did not have to say it. She felt a twinge whenever she thought about the fragility of images stored in the old hand-held readers. The only reason they had lasted this long was that very few people wanted to read what was in them.

They watched their world's rotation carry the visitor below the mountainous horizon, then strolled back toward the farmhouse, which always seemed to be waiting for them, its lone porch lamp pale yellow in the darkness. The glow of the neighboring house, three kilometers south across the plateau, winked out early, probably to save the aging wind generator. Nina Stroeve and her brothers always went to sleep at the same hour. Cyril, her younger brother, was always the first one up, but Nathaniel, the stepbrother, often got to work very late in the morning. Gemma felt a chill, and wondered again if the climate on the plateau was changing faster than expected.

She knew enough about the land to feel insecure. The fertile plateau would one day crumble to the level of the forest that surrounded it on three sides, as its substructure was eroded by underground streams from the mountains in the north. That would eventually cut off the colony's one hundred square kilometers from the flow of water, turning the plateau into another of the islands that towered over the jungle. She had studied these isolated cakes of land through binoculars, and had concluded that only the ever-weakening bridge to the mountains was delaying the colony's fate. The plateau's geologic fate was to become part of the rich forest that crowded around it; and it was the colony's future to grow and go down into the forest, and really begin to settle the planet. It might take a century or more, once the forest was mapped and its dangers discovered. The greatest danger to the colony would be to cling to the plateau. But whenever she discussed this with Alan, the other farmers, or the mayor of the town, they smiled and said that the problem was too far ahead in time to take seriously. The plateau might stand for a thousand years, which was true, of course; or there might be landslides within a few years.

Years ago, she had noticed within herself and in others an uneasiness about settling the forest, more than a

consideration of difficulties or mere reluctance to leave the plateau.

They came to the porch steps and sat down. "What do they want here?" Alan asked uneasily. "What right do they have to disturb us?"

"I think they're curious about others of their own kind."

"I know you're excited, but I wish they'd mind their own business."

Again, she felt disappointed by his disparaging tone and lack of interest, but did not answer.

"I guess I never imagined that we'd meet people from the mobiles, or from anywhere else but here. Who would've thought it?"

"Well, now we'll have to think about it," she said as gently as possible.

"I wish they hadn't come."

Gemma felt resentful, because there were too many things Alan didn't want to think about. Now he knew that he might have to start, but was still resisting stubbornly. He never asked why they were still up here on the plateau, nearly a century after the colony had been founded. Sure, everyone was comfortable, so much so that they avoided facing the possibility that human beings might never be able to fit in elsewhere on this world. She had discussed the problem with Paul Beares, one of the medical doctors in town. He had admitted that it might be a problem, but not something that anyone alive now would have to deal with. On the plateau, the colonists had been able to impose their own biology and farm the land. But if they tried to live in the teeming forest below, or elsewhere on the planet, they would have to face the bacterial and viral life, something for which their limited medical science was not prepared. Long-term survival required that the growing population, now at nearly ten thousand, leave the plateau; but the planet's biology might be too complex to fight, and the colony's isolation had only slowed learning more about the planet.

It might have been different if the old starship had survived. Its teaching programs would have been the basis of a growing educational system that would have helped needed technologies survive into the present. Their loss had only encouraged the preachers who had always condemned the dangerous accomplishments of the past, solidifying the bare, stoic religiosity by which the colonists came to accept their lot.

It had cost their grandparents dearly to come here, but they had been eager to leave the ruined solar system, with its dead Earth and dead Mars, to find open air and sky. The rest of this world might be dangerous, but they had been able to sterilize the plateau and start up their farms on it. There had been no choice for the first settlers. The starship could never have been a home; but life on the plateau became clearly defined, and they could console themselves with the hope that their descendants would one day spread across the planet.

But the plateau was only a fragile piece of soft land jutting out from the mountains, sediment that was slowly being eaten away by the jungle to the south and eroded by water from the north. It had been breaking off into the forest for ages, like a glacier into the sea. Some of the

original accounts and observations, still available in the town library, had described this whole region as having once been sea bottom. Currents had filled in a vast area with sediment, and when the ocean had receded, the built-up land had begun to erode and collapse, creating the cakelike plateaus.

The largest area of sediment was here, up against the mountains; it was breaking off to the south at more than a meter per year, as well as being eroded by underground streams from the north. She had been able to measure this much by herself, for five years now. What she could not measure was the underground erosion that was weakening the entire plateau. The community's reluctance about even sending out survey teams to assess the difficulties of founding another colony was based on the fear of disease, which might be passed between the two communities years later, even if survey teams brought back no obvious infection. If a second colony was to be founded, it would have to remain isolated indefinitely.

She was proud of what she had learned by observation, more so than of what she had learned at the library; but this year, the large cracks she had found more than three kilometers from the plateau's edge had frightened her. The fissures were widening, and might reach the mountains in less than a century.

Alan's answer to her predictions was to insist that the plateau could easily last for a thousand years or more, and by then a hundred other colonies would be thriving. The mayor had sent out a few people to look at the cracks, but no one knew enough to examine them correctly. Even her own studies were questionable, since she was self-taught. New knowledge was feared, and its absence used to dismiss fear. To deny the colony's dream, to say that it might one day vanish, was more than many people could face. Land breaking off to the south at a meter per year was nothing to fear, they told themselves; fissures three clicks long were as big as they'd ever get.

Alan got up and said, "I'll turn on the lights for you." He started into the house, but paused and glanced up at the stars. "Maybe these visitors will bring us enough biology and medicine to help us settle the forest."

She didn't answer, even though she knew he was trying to admit something of what she had insisted on in their arguments and discussions.

"Well, it's a constructive thought," he continued. "If they can move their world around, they must know a thing or two. Why shouldn't they help us out?"

"Maybe they will," she said, trying to sound agreeable.

"Well," he said, "I'd better get some sleep. Got to fix the tractor and plow the north field before noon, and you've got to start the vegetable preserves."

"Yes," she said, sighing, thinking of how many chickens she had killed in her lifetime, and whether to tell him that the well pipe was clogging up just below the kitchen sink, and that maybe the pump itself wasn't in such good shape either. He had promised to make a better cover for the compost heap, but had never gotten around to it, and the smell didn't seem to bother him.

He paused in front of the door. "What is it?" she asked.

"I wonder why they're *really* here," he said.

It was just past noon when Alan got up from his lunch to get another cup of herb tea. Gemma was still sipping hers, waiting to see if he would turn on the radio.

"I haven't forgotten," he said as he switched it on, sat down across from her at the table, and smiled uneasily. He already seemed tired from his morning's work.

"All of us here at the town meeting," Mayor Overton was saying, "and those listening at home, welcome you to our community. Most are at work, so only a few of us are here in the hall, but I assure you we are all very curious about your . . . mobile's visit to our world. You told me earlier that you had come to discuss some very important matters with us."

As usual, the Mayor sounded a bit pompous, but Gemma noticed that he also sounded unusually nervous.

"We do have much to discuss," the offworlder said in a voice that might belong to a man or woman. "I would first like to ask whether my use of your language is clear to you."

"Strange accent," Alan said, leaning over and turning up the volume.

"Perfectly fine," said the Mayor. "Please continue."

"What happened to your starship?"

The Mayor took an audible deep breath and replied, "When our grandparents came out of cold sleep, they found their automatic ship in a shallow orbit around this planet. Their three shuttles barely had enough time to land people and supplies on this plateau before the orbit decayed and the starship entered the atmosphere. Efforts were made to use the ship's reaction engines to raise its orbit as the shuttles went back and forth, but time ran out. Some of the passengers had taken too long coming out of cold sleep, and had to be left behind. Those who escaped were fortunate, but we still lack far too much."

The last part of the Mayor's statement and his critical tone surprised Gemma, raising her estimation of him. He was alluding to the fact that the colony was founded by people who wanted less, and thought it the better way, using the example of Earth's destruction as justification.

She expected the visitor to ask why there were no video communications, only radio. "We've seen the crater where the starship struck," the offworlder said. "It was a great disaster for the life there."

"We've never seen it," Overton replied impatiently.

"Too far away. Our shuttles were out of fuel by the time we got everyone down to the planet. What is it that you wish to say to us?"

There was a long pause. Gemma heard the Mayor shifting in his chair. She got up and opened the kitchen window to let out the heat that had built up from the morning sunlight.

"In the three generations of your life on this world," the offworlder said, "have you ever seen anything of the life in the forest?"

"Well, we do keep to the plateau," the Mayor replied. "It's large enough for us. Some of us have observed the forest with field glasses, but we're too busy to explore, and the climb would be difficult. Besides, it may be dan-

gerous. Diseases might be brought back. We just don't know enough. There are stories of four-footed creatures that occasionally stand up on their hind legs, but from the few reports it seems they don't approach the plateau. I should point out that the clay cliffs are very sheer and nearly impossible to climb from below. We're isolated."

"You think that's a good thing?" the offworlder asked.

"Yes. There's scarcely ten thousand of us. We're not ready for the rest of this world."

"But you will be one day?"

"Someday," the Mayor said. "Why do you ask?"

"Until now," the visitor said, "your presence has not altered the planet. Before that happens, we would like to persuade you to abandon this colony and come live with us. You're welcome to join our world, or build a mobile of your own. We can offer you more than you can imagine."

"What?" Alan shouted, nearly dropping his cup.

Gemma felt a rush of excitement as she understood why the mobile was here.

"Why?" the Mayor asked, his voice rising. "We're content here." Gemma could almost see the bewilderment on his pudgy face as sounds of surprise filled the town hall.

"It's ridiculous!" someone shouted.

"Exactly," Alan said, shaking his head and smiling, but when she caught his eye, she saw that he felt threatened and confused.

"Planets should not be invaded," the offworlder said. "They have their own lives to fulfill."

"What are you saying?" Mayor Overton demanded.

"Surely it's occurred to some of you that you're invaders. While we were nearby, it seemed to some of us that we might discuss this problem with you."

"Problem?" the Mayor replied. "What problem?"

"What will happen to this world's intelligent life."

"But there's none to speak of."

The hall suddenly became quiet. Gemma was taken aback by the point: intelligent life might one day develop on this world, but its rise would be cut short when the colony expanded from the plateau. That was what the offworlder was saying, and with disapproval. She had thought about it, but never as a crime waiting to happen.

Mayor Overton coughed. "Who are you to come here and lecture us about our life?" He sounded more forceful now. "Oh, I get your point well enough, and it may even be true. But as I've told you, our grandparents had to land or die with the incoming ship. We earn our right to life here every day."

The visitor asked, "And it does not disturb you that you may preempt intelligence here?"

"Why should it?" a man shouted from the audience.

"It's Nathaniel," Gemma whispered, realizing why she hadn't seen him coming out of his house late this morning. Then she heard a sound behind her and turned to see Nathaniel's stepbrother Cyril leaning over the open top half of the kitchen door, smiling at her in his usual, inviting way. Gemma usually tolerated his appearing at her door, as though he had a right to stop by at any time, but was suddenly annoyed with him, and looked away.

"Yeah," Cyril said, smoothing back his unruly brown

hair. "He should be home helping Nina and me, if he's so devoted to her, but he had to go. They had an argument this morning. Maybe he should move to town permanently and become a schoolster."

"Quiet!" Alan shouted. "I want to hear this."

"... but we can offer you a choice," the offworlder was saying, "so you don't have to stay here. Even if you were only to affect the development of simpler bioforms here, that would delay or prevent the emergence of intelligence."

"Our presence here can't be worse than the workings of chance," the Mayor objected. "All life competes with other life."

"But shouldn't each world have the chance to grow in its own way? Something unique may develop here—one way with your presence and another without it. We think you should consider leaving while there is still time. If you stay, you or your descendants may be taking a world away from its people before—"

"Who do you think you are," Nathaniel shouted, "coming here and talking to us as if we were children!"

Gemma glanced at her brother and saw him clench his jaw as he listened to Nathaniel, and she knew that he was thinking of all the work he had put into the farm, of how their parents and grandparents had lived and died to earn every square meter of this land. It was bad enough that she talked about the dangers to the plateau's geology. Now some intruder was telling him to clear off. For her, the offworlder's words suddenly offered escape from the past; for Alan, they called for an end to his way of life. She looked over at Cyril, who seemed surprised by Nathaniel's outburst.

"Are you threatening us?" the Mayor asked.

"Not at all," the visitor said. "Please don't misunderstand. Our aim is to persuade. To help you decide what you think, we will examine the planet for signs of intelligent life."

Gemma heard the Mayor sigh with relief. "Explore all you like. We can't stop you, obviously, but we would prefer to be left in peace."

"What kind of alternative to our life here can you offer us?" a woman asked.

"Besides the chance to join our habitat," the visitor said, "we would provide a habitat shell for you to fill in. We would place it in high planetary orbit and ferry people up. You could perfect it at your leisure."

"You assume," Nathaniel said, "that we would want your way of life," but Gemma had a sudden feeling from the tone of his voice that Nathaniel was curious about the offworlder's way of life.

"No," the offworlder replied, "the habitat would contain your way of life, whatever you would wish to make of it."

"I find that hard to believe. How could we think of abandoning our hard-won place here?"

"Our purpose," the offworlder continued calmly, "is not to dictate to you. We hope that once you have considered the dilemma, you will let this planet develop in its own way. It's your entire colony against the future of perhaps more than one intelligent species."

"Oh, come now," the Mayor said. "How do you know



that our descendants might not get along just fine with an emerging native life?"

"It would never get to that point. You're isolated for now, but the expansion of your population and the pressure of various natural changes will drive you from this plateau, and you will be forced to take what you need to survive."

"Your effrontery is unbelievable! You talk as if our staying here were open to debate. It's not and never will be."

"We only present choices and their consequences," the visitor said. "We do not believe in any absolute system of ethical norms, or their enforcement. There are only laws that rise up to serve the needs of a community, and they are not arbitrary if they accomplish that end, however self-serving they may seem to outsiders. Our laws do not govern you. You can still have your own ways when you leave here, and with greater security and power over your own destiny."

"And without any guilt, I suppose," the Mayor said mockingly. "If you're so interested in our welfare, then give us the means to leave the plateau before it's washed away from beneath us."

"That," the offworlder said, "would arm you with the means for a massive assault on the planet's ecology. Every microorganism and animal that you deemed dangerous to your life would eventually die, and the effects would become irreversible."

Gemma noticed that Alan was staring at the radio as if at an enemy. The Mayor had publicly admitted the danger to the plateau, and that the only solution would be to abandon it, something that Alan had never quite believed. She glanced toward Cyril. He also seemed a bit worried, but gave her a puzzled smile, shifting his weight as he leaned on the bottom half of the door.

"Well," the Mayor said finally. "Do you have anything else to say to us?"

"No, but thank you for listening. You may not understand yet, but we are ready to give you all the help you need to remake your lives."

"As long as we leave the planet?"

"Yes."

Alan got up from the table, opened the bottom part of the kitchen door, and pushed past Cyril. Gemma got up, went after him, and sat down at his left on the back steps. Without a word, Cyril came over and sat down next to her.

Alan said, "They just show up out of nowhere and tell us to leave the planet. Are they insane?"

"They're concerned about us," Gemma said.

"It's not their business what we do here. All life struggles, and there's no way to know what will survive. An asteroid might strike tomorrow and wipe us all out. We have as much right to be here as anywhere else."

"But shouldn't we look ahead?"

"You want to believe there's something to all this," she said, "because you never cared about our place here. I don't care what happens a million years from now."

She tried to ignore his reproach. But he was right, as far as it went. What could she look forward to here? If Alan married Nina, then Nina would move into this house. Gemma liked Cyril well enough, but it was not love, and Na-

thaniel had never shown any interest in her. Marriage to either of them would only mean trading places with Nina. Alan wanted her to find someone she could bring here and have children with, to benefit the farm. It would have to be someone who did not have a farm. And she suspected that he wanted her to stay with him for as long as possible, but was hiding the attachment he felt, which had grown stronger after the influenza that had killed their parents.

She took his arm and asked, "But what if it's much sooner than that? What if there is intelligent life here now?"

He pushed her arm away. "No one has a right to tell me where to live. Let them look. They won't find anything. We're the only ones here."

"I'll see you folks later," Cyril said as he stood up, looking pale and uneasy. "Got work to do." He walked away and started down the road toward his farm.

"Sorry!" Alan called out after him. "Tell Nina I'll be over as soon as I can."

"You'd better!" Cyril shouted without looking back, then raised a hand in farewell and kept walking.

Puzzled for a moment by Cyril's behavior, Gemma held Alan's arm in silence, then said, "Don't you see that we live here in a kind of deliberate backwardness?"

"Backwardness?" he asked, looking at the ground.

"We could have so much more if we had not rejected so much of the past."

"It was a betterment," Alan said.

"No, no," she replied, taking his arm again. "We're hiding here, living within narrow, precarious limits."

"Earth died," he replied bitterly, but without pushing her away this time, "by breaking all natural limits. I never want my life to change, or that of my children. I want it whole, as it is. We should have destroyed those old readers a long time ago." His voice broke as he was overcome by his feelings, and she realized how deeply he felt that any change was his enemy.

"I sometimes go and look out at the forests," she said softly, "and I can't help feeling that we're hiding up here. Did you ever wonder why we don't go exploring?"

"It's dangerous to our health."

"Yes, so we burned the life here to make a place for ourselves. It's not our world, Alan, because we had to do that. We came here to be free, but we're still afraid, and we cling to each other." And you cling too much to me, she had almost said.

He turned and looked at her. "You don't even sound like one of us. We're all a problem to you. I'm a problem to you. It's as if you grew up elsewhere."

She let go of his arm. "I've read and I've thought for myself, Alan. I'm not blind."

"And I am?"

"You feel a lot, but you refuse to think."

"What's there to think about? We're here, on land we paid for with two generations, and continue to pay for with our work, with our whole lives."

"And that gives us the right to expand?"

"Yes, when the time comes!"

"Even if it means preventing the intelligent life that might grow here one day? Alan, don't you see? We might prevent it without ever knowing!"

He looked at her with dismay, and for the first time she saw hatred crowding out the fear in his brown eyes. "I don't care. We can't be responsible for mere possibilities. It's only a lot of talk going on as if it were real."

"We should be thinking," she said softly, "about what we've been avoiding for a long time. It was understandable when we had to live here, but now we have a choice."

He stood up and glared down at her, then marched away toward the tractor in the north field. She watched him for a while, feeling numb, then got up and went back into the kitchen.

As she washed the dishes from lunch, she looked out the window and tried to understand her brother's feelings. Alan cared more about the farm than she did, and everything he had said was based on his feelings for the place. He had imagined himself secure here on the plateau, until the facts about the coming erosion had started coming out; but he had been able to set that aside, as a problem that was at least a century or more away. The whole colony was like Alan, she realized, afraid of the silent questions posed by the world around it. The mobile was only the voice of deeply held fears and doubts, reminding the colony of how much it had failed.

She wondered what Nathaniel must be feeling now. He had dreamed of exploring this world one day. "It will all be ours," he had once told her confidently.

She dried her hands and sat down again at the table, determined to make things clear to herself. The new thoughts brought by the offworlders' mobile faced the colony with a frightening choice, greater than any of its old problems, and she was suddenly glad that the colony had not looked for heavy metals in the mountains and developed industrial skills, or pursued biomedical research, because then it would have forgotten its fear of the past, abandoned its modest way of life, and invaded the forest.

Feeling lonely and conflicted, she got up and tried to decide what to cook for dinner. The beans would have to be soaked and then simmered until dark to be ready on time, and she would have to kill a chicken, decide how to cook it, and maybe get some three-bean salad preserves from the pantry. As she started to organize the ingredients, the tractor started with a series of sputtering coughs, and died. Alan would not be able to finish the north field's plowing today unless he fixed it.

She sat down again at the table, feeling Alan's defeat by the tractor merge with his fears about the future, and thought about calling Nina on the radio for a talk, but decided against it. Nina might not want to talk after arguing with her brother; Cyril was sure to be after her about when she was going to settle down with Alan. Nina seemed to want Alan for a husband, but something was holding her back. Gemma had often sensed it in the long, listening silences that sometimes passed between them during their radio conversations. Nina had not called at all during the last few weeks, making Gemma feel shy about taking the initiative. Something had been wrong for a long time, and getting worse, Gemma felt, but she didn't have the courage to question her neighbor.

After a few minutes, she went up to her room, where she lay down and tried to let the tension drain away.

She started to doze, and dreamed of the forest. Eyes looked up at the plateau with curiosity, and she woke up with a start, imagining that somewhere deep in the forest were creatures who were becoming aware of themselves. What would they think if they knew that their world would be taken from them? Nonsense, she told herself. If it was taken from them, they would never know. There would be no one to care because they would never be born.

She sat up, looked out her window, and saw Alan working under the tractor's hood. At least the north field did not have to be planted this year, so he could put in extra time with the harvest army and help his neighbors. He slammed the hood shut and started back toward the house, but three-quarters of the way he turned and went to the family plot and stood there under the trees, head bowed before the stones of their parents and grandparents, and it seemed to her that he was taking an oath.

Suddenly, he looked toward the house, as if he knew she was watching him. Then he started for the fence, and she knew that he was going to walk around the farm, pacing off its limits. He did this once or twice a month, usually before dinner, as if to reaffirm the land's reality. He liked the walk, he said, and the fence had to be checked, but he did it too often, and was hours early today.

She got up and went down into the kitchen, afraid of what he might say to her, doubting herself suddenly, expecting a stranger to come through the door.

### 3

Gemma kept glancing at Alan throughout dinner, but he avoided her eyes.

Finally, he looked up at her questioningly, his face pale in the harsh electric glare of the naked ceiling bulb. "So there's no chance for you and Cyril?"

She said, "He's not for me."

"And there's no one else? Somebody in town?"

"You know there isn't."

A stern look came into his face, conflicting with his soft brown eyes, which had so often expressed affection for her, but were now imprisoned by his growing bitterness. "Well, what do you want?" he asked, but she felt that the question was *What will you ever want?* "I know," he went on before she could answer. "You'd like to run away from everything here, if you could. You just don't care about all the effort that's gone into this place." *You don't care for the hard work I'm putting in, or your own*, he was saying, *and you don't care that you're wasting the lives of our parents and grandparents.*

"Try to understand," she said suddenly. "It's because our grandparents lost so much in getting here that we've been unable to better our lives. We need help right now."

He threw up his hands in exasperation. "But the kind of progress you want will only bring disaster."

"That's the excuse for our inability," she answered.

"Oh, no," he shot back. "Human beings were meant to live within narrow limits. What happened on Earth proves that. Give them too much or too little and they lose all sense of direction and values."

"We don't really know what happened on Earth. But we're also facing a disaster here, Alan. To survive we'll have to leave this plateau, but we don't have the means . . . and now there are good reasons why we shouldn't."

Standing up, he said, "I'm going to see Nina. Don't wait up for me."

Gemma started to gather the dishes as he left the kitchen. His bitterness cut into her, and she broke a dish in the sink as he went out the door. She stared at the broken pieces. Maybe he was right. She didn't care, and had finally convinced herself that there was very little to care about.

Two days later, after eating lunch alone, Gemma tuned in the radio for the second meeting between Mayor Overton and the emissary from the mobile. Alan was still at Nina's, since there were no pressing chores to be done before spring planting. Still, he had never been away this long. She wondered if he had decided to marry Nina and bring her home as soon as possible, if only to show his strange sister that he didn't need her and she should get out.

"Well," Mayor Overton said, "what have you come to tell us today?"

"During our last meeting," the offworlder's androgynous voice began, "our exploration teams were already completing their first survey of your planet."

"So you've been here a while," the Mayor said, "long before you contacted us."

"Yes," the offworlder replied.

Sounds of disapproval filled the town hall. "Go on," the Mayor said as they died down.

"We've discovered that one or two forms of animal life may suddenly achieve self-consciousness."

"Suddenly?" the Mayor asked mockingly. "Not in a million years? How convenient for you. Where might they be?"

"I don't think you understand the nature of evolutionary thresholds," the offworlder said. "These creatures have had their million years of preparation, and are ready to step onto the next plateau."

"Are they nearby?"

"You don't need to know that."

"Why?" the Mayor demanded. "Are you afraid that we'll send out armed parties to slaughter them?"

"I would hope that's not what you would do. They should not be disturbed, even by being observed."

"How did you watch them, then?"

"Very discreetly, with special equipment."

"And now you will tell us that this world belongs to these creatures."

"Yes, but we would like to tell each household in your colony personally."

"Personally?" the Mayor asked. "Why? Most of them are hearing what you have to say right now, and those who aren't will get it by word of mouth."

"We have enough volunteers to visit every home," the offworlder said. "They will convey all the facts we have gathered. We believe that personal discussion is best."

"No one will listen to you trying to talk them out of their homes," the Mayor said angrily.

"We will speak only to those who are willing to listen."

"And what will you do after you've spoken to everyone?" the Mayor asked.

"Let people decide for themselves what they wish to do about the problem, if anything."

"And that's all?" the Mayor asked.

"Yes. What else do you imagine we would do?"

"Well, you clearly have the power to enforce your will on us. I don't think many of us, if any at all, will wish to leave our homes for a new life on your mobile."

"Please understand that we never use force, only persuasion. For example, we will offer to show your people the evolving intelligences of this world. Those who make the request to view them will be given the means to judge for themselves."

As Gemma listened to the offworlder's low, clear voice and rational tone, she felt a compelling kinship that went far beyond the issue under discussion. Here was a mind that seemed to have no self-serving preconceptions, that was tolerant yet unafraid to expose hypocrisy, and that would be willing to help any form of intelligent life. Gemma did not feel threatened by the visitor. She wondered, however, what the offworlders would do if their persuasion failed. The emissary had said that they would do nothing at all, but she could not quite understand how that could be. Alan would laugh and say that they didn't really believe what they said, that it was all just talk.

"Go ahead," Mayor Overton said. "Speak to as many people as you wish, for all the good it will do you."

#### 4

Gemma watched the flitter come in low over the newly plowed south field, where Alan usually planted beans. He came out on the porch as the slightly flattened egg-shape settled to the ground on the dirt road that ran past the house.

"They're wasting their time," he said through clenched teeth. "No one's going to get me off the land where my parents are buried." She noticed that he had said *my*, not *our*, parents.

She left him on the porch, went down the steps, and approached the craft, trying to imagine the vast energies that controlled it with such ease, more power than she and Alan could expend in a thousand years of working the farm, and she felt the waste of their lives. Knowledge shaped into a graceful use of power ran the craft, which was probably no more to the people of the mobile than a shovel or scythe was to Alan.

"Well, what are they waiting for?" Alan shouted. "Let's see these superior people."

An oval door opened in the lower half of the vehicle, and a youthful face peered out.

"Greetings!" a young woman's voice called out. "May I approach?"

"Come ahead!" Gemma replied. Alan cleared his throat nervously behind her, and she felt his tension as the visitor stepped out of the craft. She was dressed in brown coveralls and boots.

"My name is Briddy," she said as she came forward.

Gemma looked into a thin, oval, olive-skinned face with dark blue eyes and short black hair. Alan was silent as Gemma turned and led the visitor up the steps.

"My name is Gemma Sziget, and this is my brother Alan," she said as they all sat down in the wicker chairs. Gemma was about to get up again, but stopped herself. Had the woman been a farmer or towns person, Gemma would have offered her some food and drink, but she was suddenly unsure. The offworlder might not want to risk contamination with alien microbes. That was foolish, Gemma realized; these people were advanced enough to protect themselves. It was more likely that Briddy would not care for their food; maybe her people regarded food that came from soil or living creatures as disgusting.

Briddy looked at each of them in turn and asked, "You've listened to the radio discussions?"

"Yes," Gemma said.

"I've come to hear your views, and to discuss them with you. And through my link, all my people who have an interest will share in understanding."

"Link?" Alan asked.

Briddy touched her temple. "All of us who wish it may have a link, to whatever degree we wish, to communicate with one another and with the intelligences that care for our lives."

"Intelligences?" Alan asked.

"Minds that grew from simpler designs, and with which we are now engaged in further design, both of them and of ourselves." Alan looked perplexed. "They are our educational, medical, and economic system, supporting our lives," Briddy added. "A second nature, in your view. But let's begin with your views."

Alan gave a nervous laugh. "What? You think that we'll just *talk* and you'll make me see things your way?"

"Either you will or you won't," Briddy replied. "That will be up to you."

"And what about all those others who'll be listening in?" Alan demanded.

"Our discussion will increase their understanding."

"It means nothing at all," Alan said firmly, "your finding a few clever animals in the forest. We're more important than what they may be someday."

Gemma started to feel ashamed of her brother, but was surprised to see that Briddy was listening to him intently, as if he were saying something important.

"Then you'd say," Briddy replied, "that you would have been convinced to leave if we had found fully developed intelligence, but you can't take seriously something still so far ahead in time?"

"Find what you like," Alan said warily. "I won't leave. We'll just have to get along as best we can, that's all."

"But even if you could coexist, let's say successfully," Briddy continued, "would it be fair for you to perturb a natural development that is powerless to resist you? Don't they deserve a chance to develop in their own way?"

"Who?" Alan asked with contempt, making Gemma feel ashamed. "There isn't anyone. All we have is your word that they exist."

"Even if there were no signs of intelligent life on this

world," Briddy replied, "the problem would be the same. You would never know what would be lost."

Alan grimaced. "That makes no sense to me."

"Because Earthlike planets will eventually develop intelligent life, sooner or later. And what do you think?" Briddy asked Gemma.

Gemma sighed. "I can't be as certain as my brother."

Briddy sat back in her wicker chair. "Alan, you've said that facts or arguments will never change your mind. That's a curious way to think."

"Now you're going to tell us how to think," Alan said.

Briddy leaned forward. "Thinking's difficult to do correctly. It requires that one strip off all loyalty to group and self-interest, sometimes even to values and traditions, to traditional beliefs and perfectly natural evolutionary impulses, and follow where the observation of facts leads, not where one wishes to go—and the conclusions reached may not be happy ones, however true." She glanced at Gemma. "Most unassisted attempts at thought are little more than a collection of musings and associations."

"My sister will think as I do," Alan said, "when she's sees that what you offer would end all that we've made here. It's not worth it."

Briddy smiled. "But equal values sometimes conflict. You were not here first. Does that mean anything to you?"

"How can it, when it means giving up what we've worked for?"

"It would be a great loss, of course, but is there a greater loss to consider?"

"Not from where I sit," Alan said.

Gemma gazed into the offworlder's face, as if she might glimpse something of the woman's life. "Briddy, can you tell us something of the way you live?"

"There may be hundreds of human mobiles in the galaxy by now," Briddy replied. "Each grows in its own way, reproducing as necessary to accommodate population and ways of living, using the vast energies of the cosmos to establish life permanently, in a continuously various culture. These mobiles grew from the few that escaped the death of Earth. But there were other survivors, smaller starships, like the one that brought you here. They settled on planets, with much less success."

"And you disapprove of those," Alan said.

"How old are you, Briddy?" Gemma asked.

"One hundred and three, counting by old Earth years."

Alan grimaced. "You seem happy enough in your ways, so why bother trying to teach us?"

Briddy smiled. "We once imagined that we could free ourselves completely of natural planets. But they are still our visible origins, culturally and biologically. Old Earth survives on perhaps a dozen worlds, in fragmented and backward ways. And because the old song of planets still sings within us, groups of our own people escape to these worlds whenever we enter such a solar system. We let them go, even though their presence will only quicken the destruction of a particular world's native development."

"You let some of your people go?" Alan asked, raising his brows.

Briddy nodded. "For them, life is native to the whole universe, and has a right to spread and compete where it

will. I hold the other view, prevalent in most mobiles, that natural planets are the cradles of intelligence, not to be tampered with, and that is why we are interested in what happens here. What you have of Old Earth's culture deserves to develop from strength rather than linger here, scratching the soil for a meager existence, always at risk."

Gemma's interest quickened as she imagined the life of the mobiles. She glanced at her brother and saw that something of the wonder was also catching him up.

"Earthly planets may never be truly habitable," Briddy continued. "Oh, humankind can breathe their atmospheres and drink their waters, but long-term survival inevitably requires extreme measures against native plant and animal life, especially against the microscopic and chemical systems. Human beings can either bioengineer themselves to fit a particular world, or wage decisive war against its life. Native life is either changed or destroyed unfairly if the colony is strong enough to grow. Three of the colonies we've visited have already failed. The rest will sooner or later fail, and we cannot let that happen, as much as it is in our power to prevent it. So we make our offers, to save what we can of what is left of human planetary life, and protect the native life of worlds that is still developing. Your lives could be extended indefinitely and your health secured. You would be given access to broad knowledge, enabling you to grow and change, and become different people over a vast span of time that would be measured in thousands of years, and might one day expand into a large portion of the universe's life. You would have a sense of fulfillment that has for most of human history been felt only in rare moments of inspiration."

Alan got up, trembling. "I can't take any more of this nonsense. You belittle my hard work and tell me that if I stay here I'll either be a failure or some kind of criminal." Gemma looked up at him pleadingly, but he went on. "That's what this person, or whatever it is, is telling us! How can you listen to it?"

"Alan . . ." Gemma started to say as she saw how shocked and hurt he was.

"Go with them and conquer death," he continued. "Live among the pure. But it's not for me. It just can't ever be, because it prevents everything still to come."

"Oh, I see," Briddy said. "You hope for a life after death."

"Our faith tells us that this life shapes us for the next. If you succeed, you go on. If you fail, then you become nothing when you die."

"Success means moral success?" Briddy asked.

"And loyalty to community, steadfastness in hard times. In a word, character that will stand through death."

"And God?" Briddy asked.

"He is unknown, but he will show himself to those who survive life."

"We hope for nothing beyond life," Briddy said, and paused for a moment. "There is no kind way to say it, but all the old religious imaginings, in our view, were a response to the humiliations of living, visions of what intelligence might accomplish in the physical realm, which is spiritual enough. We don't deny the reality of religious

feelings, but we know them for what they are, an older way of managing life, of getting people to behave morally."

"And you imagine that you've now got what all the religions promised, in the here-and-now," Alan said with a sneer. "Well, I guess we still need our religion here."

"We've made a good start," Briddy said, "on the road to a greater existence, which we call macrolife."

"But you can't be sure that there isn't another realm," Alan said.

"Perhaps there is, but I don't think so. At the very least we don't support faith by appeals to the unknown. Organized faith, especially, is a self-serving error, a way of forming unimpeachable beliefs as a shield against questioning and the distress of new knowledge. The very nature of codified faith is to resist all argument and proof, all rational longing to learn more, by ending all discussion. Faith forbids all questioning of itself. It is at bottom something familiar—life's natural self-confidence, but this should not be mistaken for knowledge."

Gemma watched as Alan sat down again, looking confused and beaten. "I don't know what you're saying. It sounds insanely arrogant to me. Get out of here! We'll survive whether you help us or not."

"What you fear," Briddy said, "is that in our control of death we cling to this side of the horizon, denying ourselves what you call further spiritual growth. But you should not fear this, because we do grow and learn."

Alan glared at her, then looked away. The visitor from the stars rose to leave.

"Briddy!" Gemma said suddenly. "Show me what you found in the forest. I want to see for myself." She looked at her brother, but he refused to meet her eyes. "I have to, Alan. There's no other way to be sure. Try to understand, and come with me."

He stared down at his feet, unable to answer.

"You're among the first to make this request," Briddy said. "I will arrange it." She left the porch and walked toward her flitter. Alan was silent as the craft lifted from the ground, but his face was taut with tension.

Gemma knelt by her brother and tried to embrace him. "Alan, please! We'll be losing nothing by seeing for ourselves. Just think, if all this is true, then there's nothing we can ever lose. We'll have everything."

He looked at her for a moment, and shook his head in denial. "You're losing yourself," he muttered.

## 5

Alan ignored her all during the next day, going about his chores with a silence that accused her of betrayal.

"It's not wrong for me to try to find out all I can," she said at dinner. The kitchen window was open, letting in an unusually warm breeze from the south, bringing the spicy smells of the forest.

"And what will that be?" he asked.

"Whatever there is."

"Whatever they want you to see. You'll end up thinking as they do, because that's what they're set to do here, make us believe what they think."



Hurt, she asked, "Do you really believe I'm a child that can be led around by the nose?"

"You always could talk."

"That's not fair, Alan."

"What's fair got to do with it? Doing right may not be pleasant." He laughed. "Even that Briddy agrees with that!"

"You're twisting things, Alan, ignoring what's really going on. The entire colony has looked the other way for three generations."

"We've been busy surviving."

"If only you'd take the trouble to think."

"I have thought about it. I listened to . . . that person, or whatever it is, spout nonsense for over an hour, and all I could see was how it was working on you, making you into someone else."

"Is that all you saw?" Gemma asked, searching his face until he glared back at her.

That night Gemma dreamed of creatures from the forest climbing up to the plateau and peering through her window. The round eyes looked deeply into her. She gazed back and saw self-awareness increasing toward the day when it would look up at the stars through a clear midnight, and question. A thousand years hence, a hundred thousand, a million? Was that too long to matter?

And then the eyes became her brother's, but still set in an alien face, and she woke up. The warm breeze was still wafting in from the forest through the open window of her bedroom, whispering about growing things—molds, mushrooms and rotting wood, and flowers.

She lay back and tried to sleep, and in a moment the eyes were at her window again.

It was afternoon, two days later, when the flitter landed again in front of the house. Gemma hurried out to the craft, not wanting to provoke Alan, and slipped quickly inside as the lock opened.

There were two people in the cabin with Briddy. Gemma was startled to see that one of them was Nina, and that the other was Cyril's stepbrother Nathaniel. She nodded at them in greeting.

"I take it you three know each other?" Briddy asked.

"Yes," Gemma said, wondering whether Alan had known about Nina's plans, and if they had disagreed about it. If he knew he was going to lose Nina, then that would explain some of his anger and confusion.

It was very quiet in the cabin. Gemma sat down next to Briddy and waited. Nina and Nathaniel smiled at her shyly and seemed reluctant to speak. She noticed that the tall, thin Nathaniel was sitting very close to his stocky stepsister. A screen lit up in the padded, egg-shaped cabin. Gemma saw Alan on the porch, looking up anxiously at the departing craft, and the sight of her brother's shrinking image saddened her.

The only sense she had of motion came from the landscape of farms and small houses unrolling on the screen. The flat roofs and straight dirt roads of the town rushed into view for an instant, and then the craft sailed over the edge of the plateau and out over the forest.

Gemma looked back to Nina and Nathaniel, and suddenly understood what they meant to each other. "I see," she murmured. "I should have guessed it after all the times we've talked."

"It's true," Nina said, her hand slipping into Nathaniel's. He held it awkwardly. "We've been lovers for a long time." She smiled. "We had to keep it a secret. But no one can forbid it now."

So that was why Cyril and Nathaniel did not get along, Gemma realized. Cyril must have discovered his sister's secret love for their stepbrother. It occurred to her that Nina and Nathaniel might not really care about what the offworlders had come to tell the colony, but only saw the mobile as a way of escape to a place where they could be together. Or perhaps they understood the greater life they had been offered and wanted to leave. Things were getting tangled in ways she had not expected. It seemed possible that Nina had even used Alan to hide her life with Nathaniel. Could Alan have known all this time? That would explain why he had not been rushing to marry Nina.

"I'm sorry," Nina said softly, "if this is a shock to you."

"It's the only way for us now," Nathaniel added, "for better or worse. I understood that after I attended the meetings."

"What do Cyril . . . and Alan think?" Gemma asked.

"Alan tried to understand for a long time," Nina said sadly. "He thought I might get over it. Cyril . . ."

"He blackmailed us," Nathaniel said angrily, "to please himself. He knew what people in town would think if they found out, how hard it would be for either of us to go there if anyone found out. He knew that Alan would have been shamed in public by the truth. We'll be free of both of them forever."

As Gemma looked into Nina's and Nathaniel's anxious eyes, she realized that they had been prisoners, and deserved a better life. She reached over and grasped their hands for a moment. Tears came into Nina's eyes. Nathaniel seemed moved, but held his feelings in check.

"Thank you," Nina managed to say, "for understanding. Alan tried for so long, but it was impossible."

Poor Alan, Gemma thought, he'll be abandoned by everyone who had been close to him.

Briddy had been gazing at the screen almost too intently, as if sensing that Gemma and her neighbors needed privacy. Now she turned toward them and said, "We're on an automatic tour." The flitter dropped low and raced over the forest canopy. "We've got small drones in the area that will send what they see to our screen. There!"

Gemma caught a flash of silver among the greenery as the image on the screen changed with flashing speed. "We're seeing through the drone's eyes now," Briddy continued.

As the picture slowed down, Gemma peered down into the forest and saw that the drone was following a well-worn path of red clay through the green and black shadows. Suddenly it caught up with two creatures moving down the trail on all fours.

"They're headed for water," Briddy said as the image steadied. Gemma saw large hairy heads set on heavy tor-

sos pushing forward with long hind legs that reminded her of grassy stalks. The creatures entered a patch of sunlight, stopped and raised their forelegs from the ground. The drone moved around in front of them and Gemma found herself looking directly into large white eyes.

"They take the drone for some kind of insect," Briddy said as both pairs of eyes stared into the screen and Gemma imagined a future civilization of clothed beings who still exhibited the expressions of these creatures, speaking a strange language, seeing the universe in odd ways, longing for things she could not even guess at.

After a few moments the creatures lost interest in the drone and began to scratch at the bark of a nearby tree. Nothing much to see, her brother would have said, just an animal that sometimes goes on two legs. We're no danger to them up here.

"We've examined dead ones," Briddy said, "and it's all there in the brain and physiology, the next step. It will happen."

"Can you be certain?" Gemma asked, hearing her brother's voice in the question.

"As certain as seeing a solar system form in the clouds of a new sun."

"Have you seen that happen?" Gemma asked, remembering the old astronomy books she had displayed on a reader that had finally failed.

Briddy nodded. "And I've watched a sun die."

"There they go," Nathaniel said.

The creatures were off again down the trail. The drone fell back, followed at a distance, and broke through the trees to catch sight of the creatures bathing in a small lake with several dozen of their kind.

"Listen," Briddy whispered.

Laughterlike singing mingled with the sound of splashing as the bipeds played in the sun-shot water.

## 6

"Is that all you're taking with you?" Alan asked as Gemma finished packing her canvas bag.

She looked around her room quickly. "I'll have everything I need there," she said.

Alan sat down on the edge of the bed. "You're sure?" he asked, as if hoping to hold her back with the question. She nodded, avoiding his eyes, knowing that they would plead with her even if he said nothing.

"I guess there was never much here that you wanted," he said, which was an improvement over saying that she would take any excuse to leave a life of hard work.

She looked at him finally, and saw the resignation in his eyes; no pleading self-pity, just resignation. "I'm going," she said, "because I can't live here knowing what will happen. It's the right thing to do, even if I were the only one."

"But it's useless," he said. "Most are staying. You won't change anything."

"There are other ways to live," she answered. "I can do the right thing, for myself, and as an example, no matter how useless."

"What do you really think of the people who are coming here?" In his mind it counted against her.

"Briddy told me that it happens," she said. "Every time a mobile enters a sunspace, there are those among them who are drawn to planets. It's best when there's a colony they can join, where they might be needed. If there isn't, they're often never heard from again."

"You'll have to learn a whole new life."

"The mobile always needs new people to increase its biological diversity. You'll benefit in the same way from those who are coming here. I'll learn. It should be interesting." She paused, wondering if she sounded almost too much like Briddy. "I'm sorry about you and Nina."

"I'll find someone else." He was silent for a moment.

"They wanted to convince us, but they wouldn't do anything about it when we refused to leave. I didn't expect that." He sounded relieved. "It must not mean that much to them."

"What did you expect? That they would force us all to leave? They did all they could." She sat down on the edge of her bed for the last time. "Don't you understand even now?"

"We'll do the best we can, about the creatures," he said softly, "at least in my lifetime. Strange, to think you'll be alive long after I'm gone. We'll never see each other again."

"I'm sorry," she said, surprised by the coldness in her voice, even though she knew he was trying to reach out to her as much as he could, in his own way.

"You really do think we're living in the past here, don't you?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, again coldly, "and I can't be part of it," and her resolve wavered for a moment as she tried to summon her reasons for leaving, some of them vague and impulsive, others clear and impossible to ignore. She thought of the thousands of jars of preserves she had set up over the years, the countless meals she had cooked, the thousands of books she could not have but had seen references to in the meager data storage of the surviving readers, and the frustrated hunger for knowledge that had grown within her until it could swallow the universe. The hope of knowledge was like new air in her lungs, enabling her to breathe freely for the first time in her life. She would spend the next twenty-five years learning where she had come from and who she might become.

"I would go with you," he said almost calmly, "but I just can't after all the work I've put into this place."

"I know," she answered, trying to sound kind as she thought that it was his stubborn pride that made him feel he had to stay. "You imagine the dead judging you as if they were alive," she continued. "That's living in the past that's dead and gone, and neither of us ever knew what it was. Why not accept that this place gave us a refuge for a time, but that now we have to move on?"

She looked out the window. The flitter was a dark shadow sliding down the white fabric of the curtains sewn by her grandmother.

"You do look down on us," Alan said bitterly, his voice breaking.

"Read some history, Alan. Learn what the books have tried to remember for us—that we did to Old Earth."

"I know all that," he said.

"But you think it means you have to live the way you do so it won't happen again. But it will, if you go on like this. I know that the mobiles don't make deserts around themselves, which is what our kind will make of this planet, of any planet, once we get off on the wrong foot." She spoke without looking at him, hoping that at any moment he would say that he was coming with her.

"I had no idea . . . that you'd thought about this so much," he said, standing before her, his shoulders sagging.

She got up, embraced him, and held his head against her shoulder. "Come with me," she said with a shudder, determined that her words would seize his will and change it.

He sighed and pushed her away. "I just can't. You may be right, but I can't simply force myself to see it." He looked into her eyes. "Can you understand that?"

She nodded, holding her feelings in check. "Maybe someday we'll be back this way. Alan, you don't know what it was like to look into the eyes of the creatures who may be the real people of this world. They'll have enough to overcome without having to deal with us. They deserve to have their world to themselves."

He gave her a defeated look, and she was unable to accept that he would be long dead when her life was still beginning.

"Alan," she said, resolved to try again, "you'll die here. Come with me and live, even if you don't understand, even if you can't feel it's right. One day you will understand."

He was silent, then said with a bitter smile, "I'll return to nature."

"To what?" she asked. "To the nature we transplanted here from jars after we burned the plateau?"

"It's all nature—everywhere," he said in a breaking voice.

"We had no right," she replied helplessly.

"We took only as much as we needed to live. It was life or die, coming here. I have to go on."

When he was silent she looked toward her shabby bag and decided that she wouldn't take anything with her, then went out through the open door of her room for the last time, through the short hall and out the front door, pausing on the porch steps that she had once watched her father and Alan rebuild, noticing that the job would soon have to be done again. The paving stones Alan had set in the path from the house were unchanged, she saw as she went down the steps and hurried across to the dirt road.

The flitter's lock opened for her, and she stepped inside, refusing to look back.

Nina and Nathaniel were waiting in the flitter's cabin, looking uncertain as Gemma sat down across from them. She realized that they had feared she might decide not to come at the last moment; her arrival seemed to reassure them.

"How many others?" Gemma asked as the flitter lifted and her world fell away on the screen.

"Fifty-one," Briddy said. "Perhaps another time we'll do better, if we come this way again and the colony is still here." For the first time, Gemma sensed a touch of sadness in Briddy's voice. "Perhaps if Earth had not destroyed itself, there would not have been this desperate colonization of planets."

"How many colonies are there?" Nina asked.

"Nine out of twelve are left," Briddy replied, "within a hundred-light-year radius of Earth. If Earth had lived, mobile habitats would have proliferated routinely in its sun-space, and sooner or later some of them would have set out for the stars, reproducing themselves independently of natural worlds, leaving planets alone, for better or worse, as the nurseries of intelligent life. We let some of our people return to the cradle, if only to prevent the death of these colonies, and because we have not changed ourselves sufficiently to forget this yearning for the daylight of worlds." She paused and looked at them more intently before going on. "We accept that there is no perfect way for intelligence to arise and flourish. Our macrolife removes us from the unconscious game of nature's worlds, but we still carry that nature in our bodies even as we strive to change ourselves and break the constraints—no, the tyranny of space-time. If that seems contradictory to you, let me point out that the native possibilities of this planet may also fail. We try to leave as many ways open as possible."

"Do you believe the colony will fail?"

"Given the biological diversity we've just given it, it may live for a while. Will it be enough? Probably not. A hundred individuals, more or less, may not make a difference. But we may return here in a century, and then everyone may wish to join us."

Gemma felt overwhelmed by complexities, but confirmed in her decision. It was not what she had expected. Although the mobile was leaving behind some people—malcontents, Alan had called them—they were not permitted to bring any major technologies with them, only their personal skills. The colony would not benefit as she had imagined. The problem was not resolved, except for her and a few others—thinking only of themselves, Alan had said.

But she could not have stayed, waiting for the colony to expand from the plateau, preventing the forest creatures from starting their climb toward the light. Even if the human population behaved like saints, subtle changes in the planet's ecology would begin to spread as soon as the colony outgrew the plateau.

Suddenly she felt that nothing would be as she had imagined, that an alien life waited for her, and that home was in the folds of the planetary crust behind her. . . .

But the doubting moment passed as she looked at the screen and saw the world where she had been born grow small. The view flashed to the mobile, and she saw a giant egg-shape swimming in the starry night, waiting to receive her. ♦

# Unmasking the Blackman



## Lois Tilton

It was Delton who named the Blackman.

You had to look twice at Delton even to notice he was there, somewhere under the grease-grimed coat and the army-surplus watch cap pulled down low over his misshapen head. But once you looked hard, it was clear that there was something subtly wrong about the way his face was put together, the pale eyes too small and too wide apart, the uneven shape of his forehead. It was obvious when you saw him walk, with a scuttle and a twist, slightly sideways to where he was going, though he could move quickly enough when he had to.

But mostly he crouched like a gnome next to Hat Mary's newsstand, watching, always watching with those sharp little eyes. "Nothin' that boy never miss," Hat Mary always said.

The stand was next to a station of the El tracks that bounded the Square. Every few minutes, night and day, a train went by overhead, steel wheels scraping and rasping against the tracks with a screech like some metal monster in mortal agony.

"What is it, boy? You hear somethin'? See somethin'?" Mary saw Delton lean forward, face intent on something in the dark shadow of an alley-mouth. Then he was scuttling away toward whatever had caught his attention. She thinned her lips

Illustration by Alan Clark

in disapproval—boy was going to get himself killed one day, messing into what wasn't his business. Here in the Square, you learned that, or you didn't last long.

It was late, after 3 a.m. Most of the trade had already deserted the streets, all but a couple of the most desperate whores, standing huddled barelegged in the doorfronts out of the cutting wind, stamping feet freezing in cruel, stiletto-heeled shoes. The heap of rags in one doorway was a drunk, lucky if he wasn't dead by morning. Mary turned her eyes to the stack of the Dearborne *Express* displayed on her counter, placing the flat cobblestones just so to keep the gusts from tearing the pages. On the racks, naked women leered at her from the magazine covers, smirking boys in tight jeans stroked their crotches, but Mary only pulled her hat down closer around her ears and chafed her hands together in their worn cotton gloves. Her chilblains hurt. It was cold tonight.

In the alley, Delton crouched behind a trash barrel. He saw things, yes, he did. Heard them, too. Heard that choked-off scream just a second just before the El went by—someone in the alley. Someone maybe being killed.

He recognized the man with the knife, holding the girl by her hair: Fat Jack Reilly, one of the Square's most vicious pimps. He knew the girl, too. Mimi—that's what Delton thought they called her. Pretty pink face, at least she used to have. Even in the unlit alley, he could make out the dark-running blood against the pale skin. The knife flashed again, this time cutting her breast. More blood. Delton knew that Jack cut his women if they crossed him, cut them so bad no man would ever look at them again. Had cut him once, just for not getting out of his way fast enough. Fat Jack took up a lot of room.

When the man in black appeared it was sudden. He just . . . *appeared*. Wearing black, all black. Jack never saw a thing. Delton watched the stranger pull him away from the girl, pulled him away just like Jack weighed nothing. Jack snarled, struck out with his knife—right into the man in black's gut. Delton *saw* the blade go in. But the man in black didn't scream, didn't go down. He only jerked the knife out and threw it across the alley.

Delton gasped, stared open-mouthed as the stranger *lifted* the struggling form of the pimp—all three hundred pounds of him. Then . . .

Suddenly Delton couldn't breathe. The man in black had turned, was *looking* right straight at him! Those eyes! Their grip held him frozen for a long, long moment. Then it broke, freed him to sob for breath, and in that instant both the stranger in black and his burden were gone.

But that face . . . No one had a face like that.

Delton sobbed with relief, finally understanding. It had been a mask. Yes. Of course, a mask. Like—like the Avenger wore. Like Captain Justice. No one had a face like that.

Delton rushed back across the street to the newsstand, gasped to Hat Mary, "I saw . . . I saw . . .!"

Mary frowned down at him. "What you saw? You gonna get yourself killed, secin' what you shouldn't."

Delton was too excited to hear her. "Man in a mask! All in black! He got Fat Jack!"

Mary's eyebrows raised. "What you talking about, you fool boy? What about Jack? What he do now?"

"It was him in the alley, cuttin' one of his girls. Then *He* come, all in black, with a . . . with a mask. Picked up Jack, *took* him!"

"Took him where?"

"I dunno. Just . . . took him. Jack, he stuck him with his knife, right in the gut. I saw, but He just pulled it out, like he didn't feel *nothin'*!"

Mary snorted skeptically, but Delton insisted. "He had a mask, just like the Avenger."

"You still believe in that shit, like the Avenger? Anyway, what the Avenger be doin' down here in the Square?"

Awe glowed in the pale, mis-set eyes. "I dunno. But he was. I mean, not the Avenger, but . . . he *got* Jack."

She considered that. "What about the girl?"

"Dunno. Still there. I s'pose. Think it was Mimi."

Mary looked up and down the street, into all the shadows beyond the dim reach of the lights, but except for the one unconscious drunk, it was empty, as if the scent of trouble had driven everyone else to cover. Which was how it always went, down here in the Square. She sighed wearily. "Guess we better go see."

She reached for the heavy flashlight she kept under the counter in case of blackouts or other kinds of trouble, methodically closed up the stand, locked it. Then she advanced slowly on the the alley where Delton had heard the muffled scream. The form sprawled on the ground wasn't moving. Mary briefly shone her flashlight on it, enough to make out the deep slashes on face, throat, breasts. "Mimi, all right. And she dead."

"But he got Jack," Delton insisted. "He *got* him."

\* \* \*

There were cats that hunted in the alleys of Dearborne's notorious Square. Delton had seen their eyes glowing out of the darkness—their eyes, all you could see until, suddenly, they struck, pinning their prey by the neck. He had come out of the dark like that, like out of nowhere. Dressed all in black, to blend into the dark. The Blackman.

"Blackman got Jack."

"Shut up, you little freak!" Vittorio backhanded Delton across the face, added a couple of sharp kicks with his sharp-toed snakeskin boots. "I don't want you hanging round my whores, telling them this shit. Don't want to see you round here again." The girls hurried fearfully in the direction of a group of shore-leave sailors a block away.

Vittorio was a mean one. In the gutter, Delton sniffled and wiped blood and snot onto his sleeve, then limped away without glancing back at the pimp. Vittorio would be sorry when the Blackman got him. *He'll see*.

Delton was used to it when people didn't listen to him. But nothing would make him stop telling his story, over and over again, with a conviction that made some people wonder. Maybe the crazy freak had really seen something.

It was the kind of place, the Square, where you didn't look twice when the police meatwagon showed up to drag the latest body out of the alley. A pimp killed one of his women; so what was new? But Jack—was gone. That was undeniable. And these days, a girl could think maybe about standing up to her man, a pimp might hesitate a second before taking his hand to her. Because who could be sure what had happened? Or what might happen again?



"Blackman got him," Delton would insist. And you couldn't deny it—*something* had.

Now, with Vittorio's malevolent eyes on him, Delton thought briefly of going back to Hat Mary, to the familiar safety of the newsstand. Instead, he headed deeper into the dark places of the Square, the alleys, the shadows under the El tracks, the trash-littered riverbank.

Once, he thought he saw a black shadow moving down an alley behind a poolhall. He followed, but when he came to the fence that blocked the way, the Blackman was gone. If it had been the Blackman, Delton crouched down among the other heaps of rags blown up against the fence. He waited, so motionless and still that even the rats crept back out of their holes to snuffle into the garbage, ignoring his presence.

He saw a man come into the alley to piss against the wall. Eddie the dope dealer brought a customer into the shadows to furtively exchange money for a small packet. A cat pounced on an unwary rat, which died with a high-pitched squeal and scurrying feet.

A while later, a sailor came in with his arm around a whore. She was wearing a short, tight skirt with a slit on one side and black fishnet stockings. Delton could make out the top of the stockings where the skirt was split. She knelt in front of the sailor and unbuttoned his pants. He held her head still with his hands as he thrust his pelvis back and forth into her mouth. She clung to his waist for support. From concealment, Delton felt himself hardening. He wanted to slip his hand inside his pants, to match the rhythm of the sailor and his whore. But he didn't move, didn't dare move, in case the Blackman might appear.

The couple finished their brief act; the sailor fastened his pants again, buttoned his peacoat against the cold, and left the alley. The girl retched and spit, then got wearily up to her feet. She opened her purse and pulled out a compact and lipstick. Delton saw her go out of the alley into the dim glow of a streetlight to reapply her makeup.

Delton sighed and unobtrusively shifted his numb, aching muscles, disappointed in his vigil. He knew the Blackman was here someplace. Dressed all in black, coming out of the dark, like out of nowhere, snatching Fat Jack.

*If I could be like that—*

Suddenly there was a cry of pain and protest, angry words. Delton crept forward, recognizing Vittorio as the pimp jerked the purse out of his girl's hand, rifled through it, then tossed it on the ground. She was down on her knees again, gathering up the contents. Delton held his breath, waiting for the Blackman to appear, to grab Vittorio the way he'd done Jack, carry him off.

But the girl only got back up on her feet, clutching the purse against her low-cut cheap satin blouse, rubbing her arm where her man had twisted it. Vittorio didn't cut his women, wouldn't mark them where it would show, but he had plenty of other ways to hurt them.

When it seemed safe, Delton left his hiding place, downhearted. He'd been sure, this time. Sure he was going to see the Blackman again.

He slipped through a crack in the fence and through the narrow space, less than a foot wide, between two buildings. Here were the package liquor stores with black

grates across their doors and windows, the nickel-a-shot bars. There were flophouses where you could spend the night if you had a quarter. Sleeping forms curled up under flattened cardboard, wrapped in newspapers. Up the block, some men had a fire going in a barrel. He could see them huddled around it. Delton pulled his coat tighter, shivering, and went in the other direction, around the corner, toward the dark shelter of an unlit El platform.

He stood still as a train screamed overhead, making the ground tremble against the soles of his feet. Then, beneath the stairs leading up to the deserted platform, the form of the shadows altered, turned in his direction. Delton's breath caught in his throat, hope and dread made his heart race. It was . . . dressed all in black . . . that face—no, *mask*—face . . . It was the Blackman! At last!

The form seemed to hesitate, poised motionless. Then, without seeming to move, it was behind Delton. A black-leather-gloved hand closed around his throat—too tight, choking. The Blackman's voice was like old, shredded newsprint. "You've been following me. Why?"

Delton strained to turn, to look at his hero, but the crushing pressure increased. "You . . ." The stricture of his throat eased the slightest amount to allow him to speak. "You're the Blackman! You got Fat Jack! I *saw* . . ."

The grip on his throat tightened, brought tears to his eyes. "What did you see?"

Delton choked, and finally the fingers relented enough. "Saw you pick him up . . . saw the knife . . . the mask . . ." A short laugh of disbelief. "The mask?"

"Like . . . the Avenger . . ."

"You're crazy!"

"No!" Desperate, Delton pleaded. "I saw how you . . . come out of the dark. The way you move. Nobody can do like that. Nobody but . . ."

"The Blackman?" There was bitter amusement in the voice.

But Delton managed to nod eagerly, despite the grip on his throat. "You got Fat Jack, you gonna get Vittorio, all the rest of them."

"All the bad guys in the Square? Like that pimp in the alley? That's what you want? That's why you've been following me?"

Delton nodded again. "Like the Avenger. Jack, he was mean, he cut his girls. And . . . I can help you, show you things, where they go . . ."

"You are crazy, you know? What's that you called me? The Blackman?" Another laugh. "I suppose it fits," said the Blackman. "I suppose it does. The Blackman. With a black mask."

\* \* \*

The meatwagon came the next morning and took the stiffly frozen bloodless body of a derelict from under the El platform. Delton was too excited to think much about it. What was one more dead wino? "I *saw*! Saw him again!" he kept telling Hat Mary, "Last night. I *talked* to him! Blackman! First, he got Jack. Next, he gonna get Vittorio! He told me! You'll see!"

She snorted, glaring down at him from under the brim of her hat. "Next, Vittorio gonna get *you*, you don't shut up. Talk like that."

"You'll see," he said defiantly. "You wait. You'll see." Mary shook her head. None of her business.

When Vittorio finally did disappear two nights later, Delton went around telling everyone who'd listen: "See! See! Blackman got him! Blackman got him! Like I said!"

The cops, who recovered bodies out of the river on a routine basis, were particularly cheerful when they identified Vittorio's mortal remains a day or so after that, when the body turned up snagged on a piling.

"They cut his throat, looks like," the sergeant noted with professional satisfaction, lifting the dead pimp's waterlogged chin with the toe of a black rubber boot.

"Did a damn good job," the Lieutenant agreed. He lit a thick cigar and stood back to let the meatwagon crew stuff Vittorio into a body bag. No one mentioned the possibility of an investigation. Good riddance, as far as the cops were concerned. One less greasy pimp on the streets.

There was some kind of filthy little dwarf hanging around up near the squad cars, babbling about the dead pimp, something about a black man. The sergeant kicked him out of the way when he tugged on the sleeve of his uniform. "Get outa here!"

"Who let *that* out of the freak tent, anyway?" he muttered to the Lieutenant.

The lieutenant shook his head. He tossed away the butt of his cigar before he climbed into his black sedan.

"Damn cops!" Delton sniffed as they drove away. "They'll see!" He picked up the butt, sniffed at it. There was a good two inches left, and he sucked hard to bring it back to life.

As he was heading to the streets, a man stepped out to block his way, an ex-heavyweight boxer named Carfax, muscle for hire. "Hear they just pulled Vittorio out of the water," he rumbled. "Hear you been talking 'bout what was gonna happen to him."

Delton backed rapidly out of reach, like a crab. "Better not touch me! Better not! Blackman'll get you for sure!"

He ducked into an alley, panting, then looked back to see if Carfax had followed him. The word was, Carfax had once twisted a man's head all the way around with his bare hands, so his face looked like it was on backwards. Blackman could take care of him, though, Delton assured himself. Blackman could snap Carfax's head right off.

Still, he decided it wouldn't hurt to hang around the safety of Hat Mary's for a while.

"They found Vittorio," he told her eagerly. "Cops just dragged him outa the river. See, I told you! Didn't I?"

"And I told you, better keep that mouth of yours shut, you know what's good for you." Mary stacked the new issue of *Leather Boys* on the rack, apparently oblivious to the models on the cover. Her expression never changed as Gallagher the beat cop swaggered up to the stand and tucked his wooden nightstick under his arm.

"Still selling the same old smut, Mary?" he said with false cheer, reaching for one of the new magazines and thumbing through it with lascivious attention to the photographs.

Unlike most other business done on the streets of the Square, Hat Mary's newsstand wasn't a criminal enterprise. There was theoretically no need for her to have to pay off the cops. Still, Gallagher on his rounds always

stopped at at the stand and left with a new magazine or a lurid paperback book, sometimes a cigar or two—the time-honored perquisites of his position.

But this time as he started to put the magazine under his arm, Delton protested shrilly to Hat Mary, "You don't gotta pay off that cop no more! We got Blackman now!"

The beat cop turned around, a red flush of rage starting to color his face as he stared at Delton.

"Don't mind him, Officer," Mary intervened. "You know Delton, he ain't right in the head. You don't want to mind him." Gallagher had his nightstick in his hand, gave his palm a menacing slap with it. "Always got a nice cigar for the police," she added quickly.

Gallagher finally reached to pocket the bribe, but it didn't stop him from jabbing the end of the nightstick hard into Delton's ribs. "He better keep his mouth shut, he knows what's good for him."

When the cop was a block away, Mary glared at Delton, holding his ribs and looking hate at the cop's back. "Twenty years I've had this stand, and I never had no trouble. 'Cause I mind my own business, I don't see what I'm not s'posed to see, I don't say nothin'. The cop, he take his share, the street boss, he take his. And they leave me be, they make sure everybody else leave me be."

She turned her face away. "Don't want to see you round here no more. Don't want no more trouble."

Delton felt hot tears sting his eyes. "You'll see," he cried, getting painfully to his feet. "You'll see!"

\* \* \*

"They'll see. Blackman gonna show them all." Huddled into his oversized coat, Delton waited under the arch of the Fish Street bridge, out of the fine cold rain. His torn, oversized black basketball shoes were soaked through, his feet chilled to the point that they were dead to all feeling.

As night fell, shadows expanded and took on solid form. Delton waited, his small, uneven eyes missing nothing. Waiting for the Blackman, knowing he would come.

Anticipation seethed inside him, made him rock from one numb foot to the other, unable to keep still. Every few minutes he put his hand into his pocket, to touch what he had inside, to make sure it was still there.

Delton turned around suddenly, and the Blackman was there, come out of nowhere. His mask was black, with narrow eyelits, and it covered his whole face. Delton frowned, slightly puzzled. This mask was different from what Delton had seen the first time, in the alley. *That* mask had frozen his breath with terror.

But now his heart raced in excitement. He put his hand into his pocket. Still there, his surprise.

"So. You have another pimp for me, this time?"

Delton shook his head. "Gallagher."

"Who's Gallagher?"

"The cop. He—"

"No. Not a cop. Not even a bad cop."

Delton gnawed his lower lip, disappointed. He'd already been telling people that Blackman was gonna get Gallagher. But the Avenger wouldn't kill cops, either. Maybe it was a rule for superheroes.

"Do you have someone else? Another prospect?"

"I guess Carfax," Delton answered sullenly.

"He's not a cop? All right, tell me about Carfax. What does he look like? Where does he go at night?"

"I can show you!" Delton's eagerness was back. He groped in his pocket, pulled out his surprise, the cloth mask he'd made, all by himself. "See? I can help you!"

But the Blackman snatched the mask from his hand, ripped it in half. "I don't need your help. I work *alone*."

Delton's face twisted in disappointment. He wanted to cry, looking down at the muddy ground where the torn scraps of cloth lay in the rain.

But then the Blackman would leave him, would go away. Gulping down grief, he began to describe the ex-boxer, to tell the Blackman where he could be found.

\* \* \*

Across the street, a dim neon beer sign flickered fitfully in the window of a bar: BL TZ. The red reflected glow colored the puddles in the street, blinking on, off, on, off.

From beneath the El tracks, Delton heard the faint, distinct sound of glass breaking. After a moment, the broad form of Carfax came out of the bar. He had his arm around a woman's waist. Delton followed them down to the end of the next block, to a by-the-hour hotel. No quick blowjob in the alley for Carfax.

Delton waited. The wind was biting tonight. When was Carfax going to come out?

If it only could have been Gallagher. He wanted to see Blackman come out of nowhere, like *that*, and get Gallagher, the way he took Fat Jack in the alley by Hat Mary's stand. Wanted to hear Gallagher squeak like a dying rat before Blackman took him away.

Cars drove past Delton's hiding place, tires *swishing* through the puddles on the street. Another couple went into the hotel. A drunk stumbled on the sidewalk, fell down. A couple of punks came up and kicked him in the head until he didn't move anymore, then went through his pockets. Passersby crossed the street to avoid them, but no one noticed Delton. No one ever did.

Carfax came back out of the hotel, alone. Delton sucked in his breath, kept shadowing him, waiting for Blackman to come. He didn't want to miss it.

Carfax went around some trash cans at the mouth of an alley, there was a movement of something dark, and he was gone.

Delton's heart surged in excitement. It was him! Blackman! He scurried as fast as he could, around the corner, toward the back of the alley, hoping, hoping he wouldn't be too late.

It was almost too dark to see. Nothing but shapes and shadows. No. *There!*

All in black, someone knelt over a motionless form on the ground. Carfax—was he dead?

But Blackman was . . . Blackman was pulling up his mask! He bent down over Carfax. Pulled his head back. Bent down to his throat. His throat. He was . . . he was . . .

Suddenly Blackman spun around. The half-masked face was staring directly at Delton, long sharp teeth bared in a savage snarl, and despite himself, Delton felt cold fear clutch deep in his belly, because *this*, this was the mask he had seen that night in the alley by the newsstand, the mask behind the mask.

Naked-faced, the Blackman snarled, "You *followed* me!" Delton was on his knees. "Please!" He crawled toward the Blackman, sobbing, "Please . . . I won't tell. I won't. Won't never tell. Please. I can help you. I'll show you. Please, you'll see . . ."

He clutched at his hero's feet, but the Blackman kicked him away, kicked him again, stood over him a moment, then—was gone.

Delton lay on his face in the alley muck. After a few minutes, Carfax started to moan. Delton choked down his tears, wiped his face on his sleeve. Blackman was gone.

He looked around the alley until he found a rusty length of iron pipe, stood over Carfax and hit him with it, breathing hard with the effort, hit him on the head until Carfax stopped making noise.

\* \* \*

"Are you sure? Are you *sure*?"

"Told you—Blackman'll get him. Like he got Carfax, like he got Matchbox Arnie, the rest of them. You'll see."

The girl licked her lips nervously. Her name was Dixie, and her lipstick was very red. Thick makeup unsuccessfully tried to hide a large bruise on the left side of her face. "Mack sees me talking to you, he'll kill me for sure."

"Blackman'll get him. You'll see."

She took a quick breath. "Okay." She went down to her knees there in the alley, opened his pants. Delton shut his eyes and felt her warm wet mouth close around his organ.

It felt really good, but as she sucked on him, other images came to Delton's mind: pictures in the magazines from Hat Mary's newsstand that he kept in his new room, in a box under the bed. They made him think of different things he'd like her to be doing, things he'd like to be doing to her, or some of the other girls on the street. They came to him now for protection, lots of the girls did. Someday . . .

Then it was finished, and he let her go. "You're sure?" she asked him anxiously one last time. "You promise?"

Delton nodded. "You'll see."

They believed him now, believed in the Blackman. He'd shown them, just like he said he would—shown them all. The pimps were getting scared. Even the cops: Gallagher had transferred out of the Square a week ago, up to the old Gasworks district.

Even the newspapers were starting to write about the Blackman. They talked about finally cleaning up the Square and warned about vigilante justice getting out of hand. Hat Mary read him the pieces in the *Express*, though he didn't understand all the words, like "vigilante justice."

Alone now in the alley, Delton searched the shadows, willing them to take human form. Just like he watched, he waited every night. Where was Blackman? Where? He had to come back. Had to. *Gotta show him.*

Delton's hand went to his pocket, pulled out the black cloth mask. He knew it didn't look so good now after he'd tried to sew it back together. Maybe one of the girls could help, could sew him another one.

*He'll see. Gotta show him, show him what I can do.*

Delton sniffled, absently wiped his nose with the black rag wadded in his hand. *When he comes back, I'll show him. He'll see.* ♦

# In the Loop

## Jane Mailander

He waves and smiles to the passing blur of cheering people along the right side of the street; his beautiful wife in bright pink dress and hat performs the same service to his left in the convertible. The Governor is sitting in the front with his wife, smiling, laughing. The unsmiling men in suits with their wires and sunglasses and hidden guns sit beside and above and behind him.

The motorcade proceeds along the street, heading toward an open place away from the choked city street, toward a grassy parkland area surrounded only by a few old buildings, and yet more people lining the street around Dealey Plaza, waiting to see and cheer the President of the United States.

And one of Them will be there. One of Them is always there. Always. Every time.

And He will be there, too, helpless, impotent, unable to save him from Them.

\* \* \*

He is crouched at the stacked bookcases, his M1 poised out the window. He is alone in the room on the sixth floor.

An open pack of Juicy Fruit is in his right hand, and he is pulling out a fresh stick. There are three left in the pack.

He peers through the crosshairs, absently chomping on the stiff gum he has just popped in so that his churning stomach will have something to work on.



Illustration by Rick Lieder

He centers on the section of road he has chosen. As he always does. As he did *once*, when *once* had meant something, before this whole goddamn thing happened.

Who is responsible for this?

He snarls through the gunsight at his target. Fucking son of a bitch. Each and every one of Them.

He is down there; He will soon be in his sights.

As He always is.

He has a memory, growing more and more blurred and indistinct, a memory from so long ago it is almost as if it never really happened. He remembers the sound, the pain, the blood clogging his throat, the confusion of going numb. Nerves gone, he slumps forward slightly, not noticing the second sound. Then the third sound and everything exploding in a white burst of light, and blackness.

But then he is starting awake as if from a bad dream, and waving and smiling to the crowd, worried, a little sick from the waking nightmare—but going by the plaza, and hearing a shouted voice just as he recognizes the location. And being slammed to the floorboards by the man in dark glasses—and waking from *that* daydream to smile and wave at the cheering throngs on the Dallas streets. And so on to the plaza, and another voice, a different voice shouting the same phrase, and the same unsmiling man forcing him to the floorboards. And waking from *that* daydream to the cheering blur, waving, smiling . . .

\* \* \*

He waits, crouched in a shooter's stance, teeth clenched on the wad of gum. The gum had tipped him off by the third time; it is the same fresh stick he pops into his mouth every time, there are always three sticks left in the little yellow pack clenched in his hand.

Sometimes it isn't a commotion from below. Sometimes it's the door. He hates those most of all. He's tried aiming at the door only to hear screaming from down below as one of Them acts—and then he starts awake behind the stacked boxes, looking at a bare road and cheering people.

And he never knows which one it will be, this time.

*God in Heaven*, he thinks, smiling and waving to the crowd over the knotting in his gut, the sick anticipation of the next step in the process that always always comes next. It is a true prayer in his mind, stripped of everything now but despair and rage. *Jesus, Mary and Joseph, get me beyond the plaza. Let me go past the plaza this time. Don't let Them get me. Don't let one of Them get me.*

The same prayer he makes every time.

\* \* \*

He always *almost* gets his target, and he could scream with the frustration. To always just miss a target is one of the worst things in hunting. *Was* one of the worst things, back when there was such a thing as *was*.

The first time, the *once* time, he'd succeeded. He hit his target. He *knows* he hit it. Or was that only the first of the dreams? Because he'd fired the shots perfectly, one two three—and jolted in place as if waking from a falling dream, to peer through the scope at an empty road, waiting cheerful people, his mouth empty. Ready his gun, aiming, seeing the back of the neck, squeezing the trig-

ger—and a disturbance below, and his target is gone the second he fires three times. Then he jolts from that daydream to see empty road and waiting cheerful people.

Sometimes it isn't a commotion from below. Sometimes he never fires. Sometimes the door behind him is kicked open by one of Them. Noise of semiautomatic fire, pain stitches across his back or turns his head into an explosion of light—and he jolts awake to see the open road, his M1 ready and unfired. Cheerful crowds. A package of Juicy Fruit in his right hand.

He's started to give names and backgrounds to people in the crowd. Are they trapped, too, that mob down there? Or only the two most important figures in this moment, this place? The only two They seem intent on changing?

Movement below. A stirring. The beginning of cheering.

He clenches his teeth in his gum, grips the gun stock.

If he can only beat back that dream-time, beat back Them. He was a Sharpshooter in the Marines; surely he can clip enough time off his reaction to finally finish what he has to do.

There'd been other goals in his life, other things he'd had to do, *once*. He'd had a wife, children, dreams.

But that was before, when things only happened *once* and were gone forever. That was before They fucked everything up and trapped him, trapped Him.

Now nothing is more important than that he shoot and kill the man in the convertible. Nothing.

As he thinks every time. Every time.

By the sixth or seventh time he begins to know the pattern. By the twelfth time he realizes that the only thing that changes between the cheers and the floorboards is a single voice in the crowd. By the thirty-fourth time he begins to search the crowd in the plaza for the voice. But the voice is never the same one twice, never coming from the same place twice. And he also notices that sometimes there *is* no voice—only shots. Then he is slammed to the floorboard in reaction to shots rather than shouts, and wakes to the cheers of people on both sides of the street. And his beautiful wife in pink waving, smiling, as *be* is waving, smiling . . .

The buildings thin out, the cheers do not change in volume or intensity, but now the sun is free of the confining city buildings, out and warm and bright upon the cheering blur, warm on his head and hand as he turns and waves again. A flash of green ahead.

Grassy knoll. Green grass the week before Thanksgiving in Texas. Grass, the symbol of renewal and hope.

How he hates the color green now. How he hates the very sight of grass.

\* \* \*

He's tried using his aiming time to quickly skim the crowd, memorize them as best he can, to find which one is one of Them, the one who causes the disturbance. He's wondered if he could free both himself and Him, by shooting that one dead. But it's never the same location twice. The disruption has come from one side of the street or the other. The ones who boot down his door, semiautomatic blazing, have been young, middle-aged, old, fat, thin, short, tall, white, black; high-pitched with hero-worship



as They shout His name, or bass-voiced with the drag of Their herohood, cursing his own name as They fire.

Lately some of the door-kickers have been female, of-ten clad in Army camo fatigues, with the hard grim faces of soldiers. Jesus, they weren't drafting *broad*s into the Services these days—

No, not these days.

The camo design changes, hair styles change, weapons change.

In a way, he's a little grateful to see Them—They are proof that *once* still goes on, somewhere. That things change someplace, some time.

He's also become very good at reading faces in the split-second of reaction time he has. In some of those faces he's seen His stamp, but less and less as this continues. Another clue which helps him begin to understand.

The unsmiling man has a gun hidden, he knows that very well. He's within arm's reach. If he can just quickly reach out, snatch the gun away, safety off, into his mouth—

No. No, it's a mortal sin. This, all of this, could be a form of Purgatory he has to relive more times than hu-mans can count, until he is absolved of his sins.

But how many more times can this happen? He lost count long ago.

If *ago* is a word that applies here, now.

But he knows who They are, has figured out who They all are, what They are doing and why, and he could weep in grief and frustration. How can They know what They are doing to him? For each one of Them, it is the first time, the one and only time. And for each one of Them, it is a noble and dangerous thing they are doing. They don't know, They *can't* know that their individual, their million million good intentions, have sentenced him to Hell.

The convertible moves around the curve of the street.

\* \* \*

Wild cheering; He is coming.

Flags fluttering; His car.

Blur of hot pink; His wife.

Him.

*Now.*

He aims, centers the exposed nape of the neck in the crosshairs, his finger tightens—

Along the grassy knoll. Waving. Smiling.

*In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost . . .*

Past the Texas Book Depository, he's going past it . . .

*Let me go past it past Them past—*

"Mr. President! He's got a gun! Look out!"

\* \* \*

One two three. The rifle jams.

The shit! The shit, the goddamn *shit*!

He slams the M1 down on the crate viciously, glares out the window. People screaming and scattering, a stepped-upon anthill. The convertible tearing off, a mass of men spread over his target. Some gray-suited men in dark glasses firing at his window.

No! He got him this time! He has to have got him—!

No. His bullets hit gray suits, no head or neck. Again.

Disturbance *there*, too late to see what that one of Them looked like. And it wavers and is gone.

He chomps down on the gum so hard he bites the in-side of his cheek. He doesn't even bother returning the gunfire. He welcomes the blackness.

One sob escapes him as the man of wires and guns slams him into the well of the convertible and jolts, gasping and choking, as the bullets thud into the agent's body instead of their intended target. His wife cries out as she is thrown flat alongside him by her own agent. More shots, screaming, the squealing of the convertible's tires as the car weaves violently away from the site.

Away from Him who could end it.

Away from whichever one of Them it was this time.

This time a high voice. Young man, this time. White. Probably from New York. He has become very good at this, learning what he can from one of Them from the one voicing—

He blinks. Wakens.

To see the cheering masses of Texans lining both sides of the city street. His beautiful wife waving, smiling; the Governor and his wife laughing, smiling. The men in sun-glasses alert, unsmiling.

He would weep, if he could—would sob, heartbroken, as once again his salvation is stolen away.

*Gravity bends time.* One of Einstein's, he thinks. Time and Space are bound—can't have one without the other.

Bend a wire back and forth too much, and it snaps off. Fold a piece of paper back and forth, and it tears away clean and straight.

This one moment in Time. This single place in Time.

And he knows, as he does every time, that there will be no salvation for him. Or for Him. Frayed and torn by so many well-meaning travelers who bent it backwards too often—self-styled heroes, patriots, scientists, soldiers, however they label what they do—this fragment of Time and Space has torn free from the rest of the universe and now drifts in an ever-repeating loop. A phonograph needle, caught in a scratched groove, endlessly and hopelessly playing a single band of music over and over and over, until the very power source of all Space and Time is gone.

Or until the groove fades away and is worn to nothing.

*That* is his only hope now. His only hope for release.

And if only He could end it by shattering his head as had happened *once*, so long ago it is almost a dream-memory, he knows that he would bless Him as he finally and truly died, and insist that He precede himself through the gates of paradise.

Tears twisting his heart and trapped soul, unable even to escape in death to Heaven or Hell, he looks at the happy mob of Dallas citizens.

And, as he does every time, he smiles at them and waves.

His M1 is resting on the stacked book-boxes, pointing down the empty road. An open packet of Juicy Fruit is in his right hand, and he is pulling out a fresh stick. There are three left in the pack.

*Next time*, he snarls, shoving the stiff gum in, snapping it in half between his teeth as he always does. *Next time.* ♦

# The Path of Remembrance



Jack Dann

In the transparent April twilight of Amboise, France, the maestro Leonardo of Vinci sat before a small fire and dropped the pages of one of his most precious folios into the orange-streaked flames. The fire sizzled as the green, unseasoned wood perspired drops that evaporated in the heat with a snap; and the pages curled like flowers closing, then blackened as they burst into flame.

Although he still had a last vestige of strength left, he could feel the proximity of death. Hadn't his right arm already died? It hung limply, resting on his knee, as if it were someone else's appendage, devoid of feeling. At least his last stroke hadn't affected his left arm, for he had been able to paint a little, even though his final painting, the voluptuous and naked

Illustration by Doug Chaffee

*Saint John the Baptist*, was completed under his direction by his young student and companion, Francesco Melzi.

A wan light filtered through the high, narrow windows, refracted through the bull's-eye center panes as if they were poorly constructed prisms; in the distance, meadows and trees could be seen descending down to the green glow that was the River Amase. The whitewashed walls of the large bedroom were streaked with soot from one or another of Leonardo's experiments—there had been too few of those, these days, for although Leonardo's mind was quick and still full of ideas, his body had failed him like the guy ropes of a pulley bearing too much strain. Books and papers and rolled sheets were stacked along the walls and on long desks; and scattered on the tables and on the floor as well were maps and papers and instruments and lenses and various gadgets of his own invention: a calorimeter to measure the expansion of steam, odd-shaped columnar flasks for his hydromechanical experiments, balances with silvery half-circular frames, a hygrometer to measure moisture in the atmosphere, curved mirrors, and a device for demonstrating an eclipse according to ideas set forth in Joannis de Sacrobusto's *Sphaera Mundi*.

All of this was concentrated in his bedroom, even though the villa of Cloux was more than spacious, with libraries, morning rooms, bedrooms, balconies, atriums, living rooms, and parlors; it was a small castle built by Étienne le Loup, the powerful Controller of the Household to Louis XI and assigned to Leonardo, by Francis I, King of France.

Leonardo smiled as he carefully tore out page after page and fed them to the fire, but it was an ironic smile born of despair. He gazed at one of his notebook pages before he consigned it to the fire. He had made this sketch during his secret sojourn in Syria, but it was done in such detail and with such care as to be a blueprint. It depicted a flying machine with long fixed wings that were to be covered with fustian and starched light silk treated in a manner known in the east for centuries and modeled after the wing of a bat; and under the skeleton of the fuselage was the figure of a man in harness, his arms outstretched and hands holding devices under the wings like a Christ aloft. Beside the flying machine was a detailed drawing of a cutaway gearing device located inside each sealed wing: a piston attached to a screw and a shaft encircled by a spring which, in turn, would drive a propeller. An engine powered by barometric pressure. He tore out the page and threw it into the fire, and the one that followed, which was more a cartoon for a painting than a sketch; it depicted the flying machines in the air, brought to life as if seen through a glass, and above the winged craft were hot air balloons of charcoal-black cloth: great sacs rising up toward the unknown regions of fire and the separate and successive spheres of the planets.

That, too, into the flames.

He had failed, even though he had had his terrible and glorious moment aloft when the heavens were filled with these flying machines of his own design. He remembered the chill of the air in the highest and rarest atmosphere, which was close to the sphere of elemental fire, and for

one perfect instant he believed that the ancient Pythagoras was correct, that there was a music of the spheres; the impossible friction of the heavens. He had passed above the clouds, which were countries of cold breath and ice and imagination, but unlike Icarus he did not rise too far toward the destructive sphere of fire, nor did he seek the aid of demons and receive a broken neck as his reward as had Simon Magus.

Leonardo could remember exactly how the land had looked from the air; even now, he could visualize the mountains and rivers and valleys, the fields and fortifications and villages that looked like models on a table. Below him the terror-inspiring armies of Alaeddoulet—the Asian prince who threatened Syria and Asia Minor—were but columns of ants, and castles and fortifications were no larger than drawings.

The memories were strong and clear . . . and painful.

And he remembered . . . he remembered. . .

He had let himself become a whore and a murderer in the employ of the sacred Sultan of Babylon. As the Sultan's chief engineer, he designed the devices that had killed and crippled ten thousand men on a scorpion-infested battlefield in Syria. He invented the flying machines and bombs made of hemp and fish glue that could throw out sheaves of fire six ells long. He designed sulfur-filled gas grenades that produced stupor and collapsed the lungs, and his armored ground cars were juggernauts that could carry two men safely inside while firing projectiles filled with gunpowder and metal shot. With the Sultan's army of laborers, quarrymen, masons, carpenters, blacksmiths, and engineers, Leonardo brought all manner of cannon and siege weapons into being as easily as if he were sowing dragons' teeth.

But it was on that bright and never-to-be-forgotten battlefield that Leonardo saw his drawings and sketches—which had so quietly and beautifully and distantly depicted his platonic ideas of force and measure and motion and dynamics—suddenly and impossibly transformed into blood, bone, and the screams of dying men. He had killed as thoughtlessly as any brigand or thief, only he had *thousands* of tormented souls weighing upon his conscience; all he could do now to expiate himself was to burn his precious diagrams and drawings and plans so that no one else could misuse—as he had—his hard-won knowledge.

But to destroy pure and perfect knowledge was also a kind of murder.

Leonardo closed his eyes, as if that would shut out the past, but he had learned, too late in life, that memory, not sight, was the primary sense perception. It was memory, cold and dark and everlasting, that hung upon him like a coat of mail. Memory was all that was left of his life and endeavors. And guilt was the eye of memory. An eye that could not be closed. Leonardo's curse was that he remembered everything, for long ago his friend and teacher Paolo Toscanelli—the great physician and geographer—had taught him how to build his own memory cathedral in the great tradition of Simonides of Ceos, Quintilian, and Thomas Aquinas. A holy house of memory, from which nothing could be lost.

Leonardo tried to wrench his thoughts out of his imagi-

inary cathedral, a place more familiar to him than the room he was sitting in, a mnemonic which had become as large and complex as a city with various additions to house his later experience. But he could not. He could only look into the flames and see the curling pages. His work. His life. His failure.

In anger and shame and frustration, he threw what was left of the folio into the flames. This was his punishment, self-inflicted, for what he had done. Perhaps the holy Catholic church would forgive him . . . the same church that he had scorned throughout his lifetime. Now, in his illness and old age, he took the Holy Sacrament from the clergy that he had once defamed as Pharisees.

"Maestro, what are you doing?" cried Francesco Melzi as he entered the room. He dropped a tray of soup and bread and ran to the fire. He was a boy of twenty, awkward and gangly, although as an adolescent he had seemed perfectly proportioned and fluid of motion. He had curly, auburn hair, and a smooth, slightly pudgy face. His eyes were large and his nose, although thin, was slightly too long; a defect Leonardo had always changed when he had used the boy as a model for his paintings. The countenances of several angels bore the best features of Francesco's face.

Francesco was dressed in green satin, and the sleeves of his shot silk shirt were pulled and puffed through his shortened doublet. Although he was dressed like the scion of an aristocrat, which he was, he wore no dags—the fringes that had become so popular—because Leonardo hated and ridiculed them. Yet Leonardo liked him to dress as a dandy, for Leonardo as a youth had dressed so; and Melzi, who had been with Leonardo for eight years, idolized his master. His cap fell off as he kicked at the fire and tried to save the last of the pages, but it was useless.

"Let it be," Leonardo said in a calm voice. "You'll burn yourself." Francesco was wearing silken *calze* hose, and there was nothing to protect his feet except for a piece of leather attached to the sole of each foot.

"Why have you done such a thing?" Francesco asked in seeming disbelief as he kneeled beside Leonardo. "We've worked so long collecting and ordering your notes."

Leonardo sighed. "Those that I destroyed were not part of the notes."

"Certainly not now," Francesco said sarcastically as he stood up. For such a seemingly placid boy, he had a temper; and as loyal as he was, there had been times when Leonardo had considered sending him back home to Milan. He was a conundrum: one moment a humble servant, almost fawning, then suddenly insolent, as if he had just remembered his privileged social position. "You made me swear to you that I would keep your folios safe, that I would not let them be sold or destroyed. And I swore because I thought they were priceless, that they would help make the world better."

Leonardo rested his head against the high back of his chair and closed his eyes. "You swore because you thought I was dying."

"And because I love you."

Leonardo nodded, accepting that. He felt a warmth in

his right arm, and an itching, as if it had fallen asleep. Slowly the warmth turned to pain.

"Destroying those pages is like murder." Francesco said.

"You wouldn't talk so if you knew about murder." After a pause, Leonardo said, "I promise you, though, those pages weren't part of my work. They were nothing more than *divertissements*, and of no consequence." As he talked, the pain worked up his arm to his shoulder like cold water flowing, impossibly, uphill, coursing through him, leaving a wake of numbness behind it. Leonardo made no outward reaction; that death would stretch out to him came to him as no surprise. Yet he was not ready for it, nor would he ever be, for he hadn't even begun to understand the stuff of the world and the heavens.

But he couldn't summon the energy to fight it this last time.

"That's a lie," Francesco said, incensed, as only someone of his age could be. "Those were your notes for flight. I read them. I know that you have flown in the air; I read all the notes. And the letters."

Leonardo opened his eyes. Had the boy searched through all his drawers and closets for notes on scraps of paper? he asked himself, surprised. "All fabulation, a story to entertain a king."

"For *Francis*?" Francesco asked. "I have always been with you when you spoke with the king, and—"

"It was for Lodovico Sforza's entertainment, my young disbelieving friend, and that was some thirty years ago. I wasn't much older than yourself. When I discovered that His Most Illustrious Lord had no interest in my proposals for instruments of warfare, after I had offered him my own *De Re Militari*, which was better than anything else written on the subject, I was put in the embarrassing position of maintaining my position with the court through my facility with the lute and my talent for storytelling. He was not so much impressed with my skills of invention and architecture and painting. Lodovico *Il Moro* was a man without patience and of limited intellect, but he did love music and high tales. Do you remember me telling you of the lyre I had constructed of silver in the shape of a horse's skull?"

Francesco nodded, as if against all his better judgment. He was obviously frustrated with his master, who seemed to be musing to himself. Leonardo's usually sonorous voice was low, almost a whisper.

"He brought me into court on the basis of that instrument, he loved it so. And I became little more than a designer and inventor of toys for his grand masques and festivals and weddings. You've read my notes for the *Il Paradiso*, which I devised for the wedding of Duke Galeazzo? For that I invented a pulley to elevate the Sacred Nail." Leonardo warmed to the story, and the pain in his arm and shoulder subsided, as if discourse and deception were the cure; but he felt suddenly chilled.

Yet he did not feel like a dying man. Perhaps again he had eluded the scythe of the shadow.

"I've read your letters to the Devatdar of Syria. I know of the earthquake and the great Mamluk invasion and your hempen bombs and—"

Leonardo forced himself to smile. "All bullwash. I was never in the Orient. Stories for *Il Moro*, entertainments, ideas I gleaned from traveling monks and explorers and slaves from Nubia and Russia and Circassia."

"But all those drawings and inventions and notes . . . ?"

"I would dress in disguise and read them to *Il Moro* and his friends over table every week. And I would show them the sketches and cartoons and diagrams. They loved it."

"Master, I cannot believe this. If it were true, why, then, didn't you burn the fables we collected?"

"How do you know I don't intend to do that very thing?" Leonardo asked, a hint of gentle mocking in his voice. He was wearing a white damask gown; its smoothness and plainness seemed to focus and accentuate his pale, graven face, his strong, almost harsh features which had been pulled downward by the gravity of years.

In his youth, Leonardo's angelic face was the model for some of Verrocchio's most sublime sculptures. But now age lines divided and scoured his face, as if it were a *tabula rasa* that had been attacked during the long night by a demon experimenting with silverpoint. Leonardo's once soft, almost feminine mouth had hardened, the corners of the thin upper lip curving down, their lines extended by the growth of his long, flowing white beard. But with age his eyes had become his most arresting feature; they took friends, courtiers, and kings by surprise. They were pale blue and set deeply into his proud, worn face, giving the unsettling impression that he was a robust young man wearing a Greek mask.

But just now the face was still, the eyes somehow dim and focused on some perspective point burning in the hearth before him. After a pause, he said, "No, I shan't burn any more pages." Again he chuckled, ironically, as the pain returned with greater strength than before. But he kept up the ruse. As if this were another production staged for Francis, or Lodovico Sforza, or the ingrate Lorenzo de' Medici, who had been called "The Magnificent." "The work is too important. That's why I entrusted my estate to you."

"Then why?"

"I burned what was frivolous and dangerous, for the substance of my life's work must be taken seriously. The fables are legitimate art, not sleight-of-hand. But *you* believed I had secretly been to the Orient, didn't you? And so would others. If it were discovered that all of that was fabrication, and discovered it would be, then none of my work would be taken seriously. If a prince had one of my machines of fancy constructed, and the flyer fell to his death like Icarus, as he certainly would, I would be remembered as just another prestidigitator and charlatan, such as my old companion, Zoroastro de Peretola, may he find his way to Heaven."

"You could have simply appended a note to the folio, explained what you have told to me," Francesco said.

"Would you believe such a thing?" Leonardo felt pain coursing through his arm and shoulder and chest, as if the previous tingling and numbness had been a vacuum waiting to be filled with it.

Francesco lowered his eyes. "No. I don't believe you now."

"Then there you are, Francesco, doubting your master in his last hours. *Quod erat demonstrandum.*" And a familiar and deep pain coursed through him; and he had the curious thought that his chest would burst open like the lion that Leonardo had constructed of felt and metal two years ago in the month of October. He had produced a stageplay, which was a small but very successful part of a festival given in honor of the beautiful and bored Marguerite de Valois, sister of the young, peripatetic Francis, King of France. When the king took his designated part and raised the "magic" wand, the lion, a clanging, terrifying, steam-raging monster, split in two, revealing candlelit insides of radiant turquoise blue.

"Now help me to bed, young friend," Leonardo said, straining, as if out of breath, "and then call our most illustrious king's physician . . . and a priest, that I may take the Holy Sacrament."

Leonardo thought it odd, for just then he saw Francesco seemingly caught in the air, as if all motion had somehow been stopped; the boy was bending over him in a position impossible to maintain for more than an instant. But maintain it he did, and then Leonardo watched his aristocratic young friend and servant disappear, just as one often does in a dream when scenes and personages shift without causal sequence, and he found himself standing before the memory cathedral of his own making.

The cathedral was larger and more expansive than the great Duomo of Florence or Brunelleschi's Santo Spirito. It was a church of many domes rising from an octagonal base, and around the domes were cupolas reaching upward into a pure azure Florentine sky. It was as perfectly formed as a geometrical theorem, for it was, indeed, a living structure of pure mathematics. It was pure white and smooth as dressed stone and was the form for all of Leonardo's ideas on architecture, the perfection he had never been able to fully express outside his mind's eye.

As he had so many times before, Leonardo entered the cathedral, but this time he was not musing or searching for an obscure fact; he was walking into the structure that contained all the treasures that was his life. Toscanelli had taught him well, for now, at the end, Leonardo had the safe haven of perfect memory with which to shut out the pain and fear of death. Toscanelli had told him long ago to construct a church in his imagination, a storage place of images, hundreds of thousands of them, which he called *loci* and would represent everything Leonardo wished to remember.

A church for all his experience and knowledge, whether holy or profane.

And so Leonardo had learned not to forget. He caught the evanescent and the ephemeral stuff of time and trapped it in this place, all the happenings of his life, everything he had seen and read and heard; all the pain and frustration and love and joy were neatly shelved and ordered inside the colonnaded courts, chapels, crossings, vestries, porches, towers, and crossings.

He passed under large reliefs and terra-cotta roundels—each figure and line an image, a cue for memory—and through the principal doorway into the north tower. The bronze statue of a three-headed demiurge stood before



him, as if to block his passage. One of the heads was his father's: the strong chin, glaring expression, and prominent, hooked nose; cheek to cheek to jowl beside his father's face was Toscanelli's: a calm, soft visage, deep, tired eyes gazing compassionately at Leonardo; and the third head was Ginevra de' Benci's: the most beautiful face Leonardo had ever seen. As a young man, Leonardo had once burned with passion for her; and was, in fact, engaged to marry her. But that was before his false accusation of *sodomita* by an artist's model who was paid by one of Leonardo's jealous rivals.

Ginevra had the same heavy-lidded, gazing eyes as Isabella d'Este—whom Leonardo had painted as the "Mona Lisa"—although Ginevra's face was rounded with youth and haloed with curly hair. But it was her mouth, pouting, yet pulled tight, that gave her a quality of both earthy sensuality and the sublime. And in life her eyes were reflections of her red hair, as if a feral goddess had descended into the garden of Eden.

Leonardo was looking at the faces of revealed knowledge, the subjects every university student had to recite from Gregor Reisch's *Margarita Philosophica*. Although Leonardo had never gone to university, he had read the book, remembered the frontispiece which depicted the three branches of Philosophy: *Materia*, that which is natural or material; *Mens*, that which pertains to the mind; and *Caritas*, which stood for universal love. All branched from those three heads, which stared blankly at him, as they always did when he entered their quarter to retrieve this or that bit of information.

But then Ginevra's lovely sculptured head slowly came to life, the expressive face becoming motile, the high-boned cheeks reddening as her eyes turned pale and as unnaturally colored as he had once painted them. She turned her head, focusing on him, and smiled. And in her face and eyes Leonardo saw a reflection of himself as he had once been: selfish, sensual, self-obsessed, incapable of love. She was a cruel mirror for an old penitent.

As Leonardo approached her, his father's head came to life, as did Toscanelli's.

"What do you want here?" his father asked sternly, as if he was still a notary admonishing clients even in death.

Struck by the question, Leonardo was at a loss for an answer. The statue moved toward him, blocking his passage entirely. "There's no sanctuary for you here."

"Not for a sodomist and a murderer," Ginevra said, her eyes glassy, as if with tears.

"I was *not* a sodomist," Leonardo whispered, painfully accepting the mantle of murderer.

"It does not matter now," Toscanelli said quietly. "Memory is for the living."

"You cannot remain here," his father said. Only hell and perhaps purgatory remains for you."

"We will guide you there," Ginevra said. "Come. . . ."

And the creature reached out to embrace him, stepping through the dark mahogany portal of the entrance-way as it did so.

Leonardo fell back, barely escaping its stony grasp, and then lunged past this Geryon monster that had taken the faces he had most loved and hated.

He ran through the narthex and into the nave, through aisles divided into vaulted squares and gilt bronze doors that led into baptisteries which contained his experiences and books and all the people he had ever seen or met, past dark windows topped with pediments that promised all his ideas for paintings and sculptures and inventions. He ran through the squares and corridors and chapels and choirs that were much more than the manifold bits of information he had consigned to memory, but were the ghostly substance of his life itself: cold walls and friezes of fear; tapestries of familial and sensual love, small chapels of security and pure, lucid meditation; and dark chambers of loathing, ambition, and guilt.

He passed through his dozens of chapels and aspidals and came to a high-columned, domed room aglow with thick, wax candles. A high altar seemed to rise from its antependium. High mass was being read, but the only words Leonardo could hear in the empty room were, "To God our Lord and Master and Ruler, to the Glorious Virgin Mary, to Monsignore Saint Michael, and to all the blessed angels and saints in Paradise. . . ."

An entrance to his right led into a gallery, and Leonardo shivered, knowing what it was. He had designed a mausoleum more magnificent than any before conceived, and like most of his projects, it was never built. He knew all of its terraces and doorways and sepulchral halls, each hall containing five hundred funeral urns, and each vault constructed like the *etruscan tumuli*. The passageways were as labyrinthine as those in the pyramid of Cheops or the treasury of Atreus at Mycenae.

As Leonardo hurried through a corridor, the granite floor cold on the soles of his feet, he passed the dark room he knew he could not peer into. He knew he would find himself in a one of the sarcophagi he had designed.

The revelation chilled him, but did not surprise him.

For he knew which of the passageways led out of the tomb, down the terraced steps, and into the streets of Florence, into that particularly pellucid light of the city of his youth.

And so he moved quickly and unerringly through the cathedral that had taken his life to construct.

Through its halls and mausoleum mazes.

Then Leonardo found and opened the bronze door that led outside; and as he stood on the terraced steps in the soft, almost blue light which comes just before dusk, he could feel the cool scented breezes and see Florence below and around him.

I cannot be dead, he thought as he smelled the aromas of hyacinth, lilies, chicken, figs, fava beans, fish, and smoke, followed by the pungent odors of horses, feces and urine, all the familiar smells of the city he loved. From here he could see the great copper dome of the Duomo, and next to it the Baptistery, and the Campanile. He was home. There the greenish-yellow Arno flowing as if it were time itself, and the ancient walls that were the perimeters of the city, and below him spread the chockablock buildings, the warehouses and churches and villas and tenements, the gardens and olive trees and ponds of meadowsweet and lily, and the castles and pillared houses of the rich. The streets crowded with merchants and littered with

refuse, the vellum-covered windows of the buildings, the festivals. . . .

Then he was walking through the streets, as a youth once again, pausing at the markets and fairs and bazaars, pushing through the crowds of street vendors, guildsmen, beggars, and merchants of silk and satin. He watched the tall men with fair hair and long noses and the fulsome, civilized women who bound their hair and wore gowns of fine gold brocade and peacock colors of alexandrino, verde, and berettino. The vendors hawked their wares and gossiped with customers, beggars shook and danced for a denari, children in rags scampered and shouted and frightened the veiled wives of Burghers hurrying to get home before curfew, which was imposed at sunset.

Gossip flowed around him like warm, turbid bathwater: a Bolognese youth was arrested on The Day of San Giovanni for cutting off the tassels of men's belts, a man was hung on the gallows but did not die and had to be hung again, a bear owned by someone in the city gored the daughter of Giovacchino Berardi, yet she lived, thank God!, the Palagio de' Signori was struck by lightning, and a monster with a horn in its forehead and a mouth split to the nose was born in Venice.

The streets began to darken . . . and empty, and Leonardo heard the wails and cries of peasants paid to walk behind the coffin of a torchlit funeral procession. A train of sixty peasants marched through the streets, a few of them stopping by the little wickets of great houses and palaces that fronted the street to buy a flask of sour wine. Such was the Florentine custom.

Leonardo knew it was he they followed, but he escaped down the Street of the Watermelon into the artisan's quarters and walked west through the now desolate arcades and tiled floored passageways of the Via Pellicceria, past the stalls of furriers and blacksmiths and fruit and vegetable vendors; most of the shelves were empty of goods and produce and the shopkeepers' windows were

closed for safety, for it was about twenty-three in the evening, as the Florentines counted, or seven o'clock.

He walked through the goldsmith district, passing Botticelli's workshop, until he finally came to Verrochio's gray bottega, a house and workshop of three stories. Leonardo had lived and apprenticed here for ten years, and during that time Verrochio had often assumed the roles of parent, teacher, friend, collaborator, and confessor. Leonardo could hear his master's high-pitched voice, among others, through the open windows on the second floor. They were arguing about Donatello's paradox, that something may be beautiful even if it's ugly.

Leonardo could not help but smile.

But his reverie was disturbed by the criers who began shouting in the empty streets. Curfew was officially in effect. The gates to the city were locked. Doors were locked and bolted to keep out thieves and murderers and mercenary soldiers. Only police and those of privileged position had passes to navigate the stone streets of the "most perfect city in the world."

It was dark, but for the yellow glow of candles flickering and guttering through the windows of the city, which created a luminous haze that seemed to float toward the star-dimmed sky.

Leonardo tried the thick, oaken door, which was not yet bolted. Verrochio always left it open for him, as Leonardo was always late. Locking the door behind him, he felt warmth and safety and comfort, even though it was dark and damp-smelling in the hallway. But Leonardo knew his way to the stairs. From there, he could smell figs and the tangy smell of meat and feel the radiating warmth from the hearth above.

Verrochio, hearing his footsteps, called his name.

Leonardo answered and greeted his friends.

He was an old man who had finally and forever come home. ♦

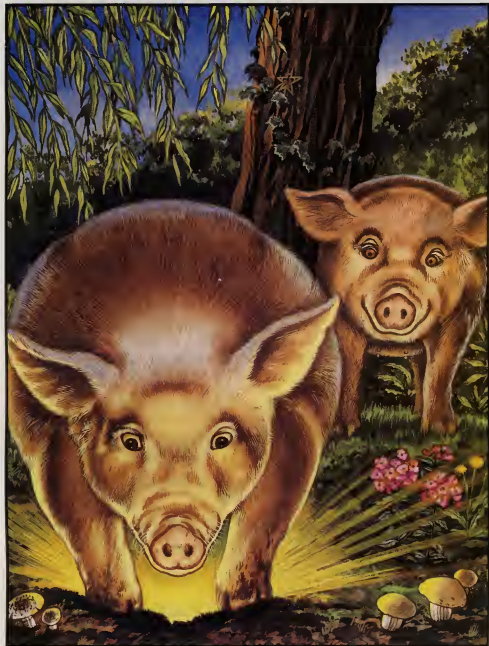
# AMAZING<sup>®</sup> STORIES

## Congratulates The 1992 Chesley Award Winners

Best Cover, Magazine  
Best Cover, Hardback  
Best Cover, Paperback  
Best Interior Illustration  
Best Art Director

Michael Whelan, *Asimov's* November 1992  
Don Maitz, *Magician*  
David Cherry, *Sword & Sorceress IX*  
Alan M. Clark, "Poles Apart"  
Jamie Warren Youll, *Bantam Books*

# This Little Pig Had None



Thomas M. Disch

Imogen thrilled to the way Mrs. Pinkham had of stepping over the barn door sill, as dainty as a princess, as though she never in all her life had stepped on anything but dry straw. When Imogen grew up to be a sow she wanted to be just like Mrs. Pinkham. She didn't reveal this ambition to the other swine, because it was commonly held among them that Mrs. Pinkham was unstable. Indeed, some of the liveliest and littler piglets would squeal "Crazyham! Crazyham!" as they trotted by—a cruelty Mrs. Pinkham did not condescend to notice. Imogen admired her for that, but she admired her from afar.

The reason Mrs. Pinkham was held in such low esteem was that she believed in Diet and Exercise. Diet and Exercise, Mrs. Pinkham declared, were

Illustration by Hannah M. G. Shapero

the two udders of a fulfilling life. Never, she would advise the younger animals of the barnyard, eat more than you absolutely must. And never get so out of shape you can't squeeze under a fence. Observe those two fundamental laws of Diet and Exercise and, so Mrs. Pinkham promised, you would never be carted off to the slaughterhouse.

Most pigs are terrible fatalists and tend to pooh-pooh anyone with a scheme for personal salvation. Fate rules every barnyard, *que sera sera*, and all that. On the other hand, that was no reason to go off your feed. One lived to eat and ate to breed and bred for the good of all swine, so that the race be continued and its wisdom preserved. That was the view held by all the more thoughtful pigs on the farm, and it was just those pigs—the smartest and most outspoken—who objected most vehemently to Mrs. Pinkham and her theory of Diet and Exercise.

"Can you imagine," said Mrs. Gross, a sow of fully two hundred sixty pounds and a marvelous breeder, "what this barnyard would be like if we all behaved like piglets of six weeks? Busting through fences and running off to the ends of the earth! What does she do out there, I'd like to know."

"She says," Imogen ventured, "that she has a lot of fun. She goes right out into the stream and squats down and gets really really clean."

Mrs. Gross gave a theatrical shudder. "I daresay there's no one *cleaner* than Mrs. Pinkham—for what that may be worth. If I were a *duck*, I would have to envy her, but as I am a pig I must say that I think she is setting a terrible example with her nonsense about Diet and Exercise. If it were only a bee in her ear, I would not mind, but her folly affects all of us. Every time she manages to squeeze under a fence, the Squire must give his time to mending her depredations—time he might have spent feeding us!"

This was a doubtful proposition, since the Squire was notoriously lazy in the matter of fence-mending. But it would not have done to put Mrs. Gross into a temper, as the old sow had been known to bite the tail off more than one pig on that farm. So Imogen made a snort that could be interpreted as acquiescence and, by way of changing the subject, asked after Flora, Lily, Violet, Pansy, Rose, Donald, Maurie, Russell, Paul, Doug, and Stu.

Mrs. Gross, who never wearied talking of her litters, beamed with matriarchal pride and announced that the Squire had been so pleased with Russell's Rapid Gains that when the other stoats had been gelded Russell had been kept out of harm's way in a separate pen. Apparently the Squire intended him for breeding.

"How lucky for Russell," said Imogen.

"Luck had no more to do with it," huffed Mrs. Gross, "than Diet and Exercise. The secret of Russell's success is Rapid Gains, and the only way to achieve Rapid Gains is by eating all the time and as much as you can. Russell is always at the trough. When he was only a suckling I could tell him apart from the others just by the way he'd tear into me. That little pig had an appetite like a silo." With a grunt of satisfaction, she leaned into a fencepost and gave her back a good scratching.

"One can't deny," Imogen said, "that Russell has got very fat."

"Fat," said Mrs. Gross sternly, "is where it's at. You get good and fat like me and you can be sure the Squire will breed a few litters out of you before you're sent to the sausage-maker. But spend any more time listening to old Pinkham's twaddle about Diet and Exercise and you'll be shipped off the moment you weigh in at two hundred pounds or so. Young gilts like you who gain too slow don't get bred and that's a fact. So if you want to farrow, mark my words and *eat*."

"Mm," said Imogen, who was not at all sure she wanted to be bred. The sight of a boar mounting a sow struck her as undignified at best and sometimes as out-and-out disgusting. The noises they made! And nursing piglets was no bed of roses either. Of course, being still a gilt, she'd never experienced the mysterious ecstasies of estrus (if they *were* ecstasies), and none of the sows on the farm had ever been able to explain what it was like to be in rut except in the broadest of generalities.

From the side of the sty nearest the gate came the sound of metal banging on metal—the flaps of the pig feeder—and with that sound came a vision of ground corn, cooked soybean meal, and great juicy gobbets of spoiled cheese. There had been a power failure at the Co-op down the road and fully half a ton of ripening cheese had spoiled, all of which the Squire had bought up for his pigs. For the moment, all thoughts of Diet and Exercise were driven from Imogen's mind. Nothing so delighted her as funky cheese. She trotted after Mrs. Gross and was one of the first to reach the hot swirl steaming in the trough.

\* \* \*

For the next two weeks, while the supply of cheese lasted, Imogen's regard for Mrs. Pinkham's philosophy had little influence on her actions. Even at times when the gate would be standing ajar, she could not bring herself to leave the sty for fear that she might miss a bucket of rotting cheese. It was so yummy, that cheese, especially the hunks that had gone greeny-blue with mold. Then, once the cheese had roused her appetite, it took more will power than she possessed to pass by the commoner offerings in the trough. Who can deny the satisfaction to be had from a bellyful of corn topped off by a bit of silage for the sake of one's bowels! As for Exercise, Imogen felt little inclined, after such lavish meals, to trot off anywhere except to the farther, drier side of the sty where she would plod down to enjoy the view across the west meadow.

To every food there is a season, and to every season an end. The day came when there was no more cheese to enrich the pigs' ordinary fare. On that day just after breakfast Mrs. Pinkham approached Imogen where she was taking her ease, reclining against a stump, and informed her that some of the older stoats had made a break in the fence quite large enough for Imogen and even Mrs. Pinkham to get through, as well, with a bit of squeezing. If Imogen chose to accompany her into the woods, Mrs. Pinkham was certain they would find plentiful acorns under the oaks. "And something else, too. Something much more interesting than acorns."

"What do you mean? Give me a hint!" Imogen wrinkled her nose with curiosity. "Is it something to eat?"

"It is Something Quite Wonderful. I'll say no more

than that. In any case, if I did try to tell you, you wouldn't credit me. It's so strange."

"You've found where there's more cheese! You've found where it's stored!"

"No. This is *better* than cheese."

Imogen could not restrain a small snort of skepticism, but she agreed to go with Mrs. Pinkham into the woods, where there were, to be sure, a few acorns on the ground, though only enough to whet one's appetite. This early in the fall most of the acorns still hung in clusters overhead, tantalizingly out of reach. All the while, as they went about from oak to oak, Mrs. Pinkham discoursed on her favorite theme of Diet and Exercise.

"Show me a pig that can't run faster than a farmer and I'll show you a pig in a poke."

"How's that?" Imogen asked.

"A poke," Mrs. Pinkham explained brusquely. "A bag, a sack. A pig on her way to market, if you catch my meaning."

Imogen sighed. "Oh, we're all certain to go to market some time or other. If one's time has come, how will it help to run about the sty faster than other pigs?"

"Obviously, Imogen, that is not the object of keeping fit. One must keep an eye peeled and be *out of the sty* at such times. Now—what do you say to a game of tag?"

"Tag?" Imogen could not conceal her dismay. "But what of the secret you were going to show me?"

"If you can catch me, then I'll tell you my secret. As to *showing* it, that isn't possible, strictly speaking. And yet," she added teasingly, "it's also quite impossible to conceal." With which, and a wiggle of her tail, she was off pell-mell down the hillside, crashing through the brittle ferns, jumping over recumbent trees, not pausing to nibble a single one of the mushrooms sprouting everywhere like dreams of food.

Imogen followed at her best pace, but even with the advantage of her youth she could not overtake the robust Mrs. Pinkham, until, with a gleeful squeal, she lowered her rump into the grass and slid to a stop just a few yards short of the stream that marked the northern limit of the Squire's property. Imogen tumbled over Mrs. Pinkham and would have plunged into the stream had she not been brought up short by the trunk of a beech tree.

"Oh, isn't this lovely!" Imogen exclaimed, when she had caught her breath. "So peaceful, so quiet. The grass, the flowers, the murmuring brook. This is the perfect spot for a picnic."

"Lovely? Oh, yes, but these bucolic prospects can make one sad as well, for we begin to wonder why we can't live our lives out here instead of in that filthy sty. There was a time, as I've heard tell, when pigs could wander at liberty in the woods, free as the foxes and field mice." She heaved a sigh. "Ah, well, one must eat, drink, and *be merry*. All in moderation, of course."

"Are we near your secret now?" Imogen demanded.

"It's only a short distance further on."

Imogen followed Mrs. Pinkham across a moist tussocky meadow toward a distant stand of willows. The nearer they drew to the willows, the more certain grew Imogen's conviction that the earth beneath their feet had turned to

cheese! So thick was the smell, so ripe, so arousing, that Imogen could scarcely keep her wits about her. She must eat—and at once! But though the smell of the cheese became more overpowering at every step, the source of the smell remaining maddeningly invisible.

"Where is the cheese? Its smell is everywhere, and so intense. We must be right on top of it."

"It's not cheese that you smell. But we are right on top of it. It's a kind of potato that grows only under certain trees. Would you like to eat one?"

"Oh, yes! Oh, please! I must have one. Now! How can I get to it?"

"You must practice Self-Control—and so must I. These beneath the willows won't be ripe till November at the earliest. But under the pine tree over yonder there are some that should be ready to be dug up now."

As though released from a catapult Imogen bounded across the meadow to the pine tree, where, as promised, the same, or a similar, deliriously delicious smell permeated the air. She spun around trying to isolate a vein of odor intenser than the glory overall and, more by instinct than deduction, began to root up the earth at the very base of the pine tree. By the time Mrs. Pinkham had reached the pine tree, Imogen had dug up and eaten one of the precious tubers.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, as its power detonated through her mouth. "Aht!" She rolled over on her back, conscious of nothing but the sublimity of her first truffle.

\* \* \*

In the weeks that followed Mrs. Pinkham schooled Imogen in the arcane skills of truffling, teaching her to distinguish between the common *Tuber aestivum* and the scarcer but tastier *Tuber magnatum* to be found beneath the willows. There were, in all, eight types of truffles that grew on the Squire's lands, and only Mrs. Pinkham, the local squirrels, and now Imogen knew of their existence.

Imogen became so devoted to the taste of the truffles that she would not let a day go by without a foray from the sty. She thought nothing of venturing long distances and rooting in the least friable soils for the reward of a single truffle. Under Mrs. Pinkham's tutelage she learned to leave some three or four truffles untasted wherever they grew in any abundance so that next season the soil would be blessed with renewed increase. She became almost indifferent to the everyday swill in the trough and would sometimes lie dreaming of *Tuber melanosporum*—its warty skin gleaming brownly, its black flesh marbled with white veins—while the other pigs bolted down their insipid mash of soybean meal and corn. She lost weight, an unheard-of thing, and became an object of greater derision to the barnyard's animals than Mrs. Pinkham had ever been. Twice as she had shouldered her way to the trough (she did continue to enjoy a hearty breakfast), Pansy Gross bit at her tail. On the second occasion, Imogen made Pansy pay dearly for her bad manners, and no one thereafter made the same mistake. The shredded stump of Pansy's ear was a vivid testimony to the effectiveness of a regimen of Diet and Exercise.

Not that Imogen herself any longer set much store by Mrs. Pinkham's theories. If she could have had truffles



without stirring from the sty, that would have been her dream come true. But you can't eat dreams. If Imogen was to have truffles, she must root for them. Diet and Exercise weren't to be pursued for their own sake, Imogen understood now, but as a means to the end of more truffles and still more truffles and truffles till the end of time.

\* \* \*

Time! So absorbed had Imogen become in each day's drama of searching the surrounding woods and meadows for more truffles that she had quite lost track of Time in its larger dimension. Then, early one December morning, she awoke to discover the ground outside the barn rimed with frost and, when she rooted at it, frozen so hard as to be nearly impenetrable. What had been the most sodden corners of the sty were solid as rock. Imogen scraped at the frozen earth with her hooves and scored it with her teeth, but nothing availed. Would she find the ground outside the sty in the same condition?

Frantically she trotted off to the corner of the fence where a loose wire afforded her daily egress to the woods—but the wire had been made tight. Imogen was beside herself with anxiety. She *must* get to the wood and learn if the ground there too had been sealed by the sudden frost. But the wire was stapled securely to the post, and the ground beneath it was unyielding.

"I must remain calm," Imogen told herself. "I must think clearly. I must practice Self-Control."

Calmly, clearly, Imogen reasoned that if she could not get out under the fence, she must use the gate that the Squire and his men used themselves. But when she went to the gate, her horror was compounded by the sight of the ramp that had been set up at the door of the barn in only the last few minutes. That ramp could mean but one thing: the Squire meant to cull pigs for market. From afar she could hear the creak of the approaching cart in which the culled swine would travel to their last destination.

This was not the day, surely, to be seen standing beside the gate! Imogen retreated to the far side of the sty and once again, with the energy of desperation, worried the wire and tore at the frozen ground. In the distance she could hear the squeals of the first pigs being forced up the ramp into the cart—and the voice of poor Mrs. Pinkham loudest among them. "Imogen!" she shrieked. "Where are you, my dearest Imogen? Remember me! And always follow a program of—"

The good sow's last words were drowned in a cacophony of terrorized screams, but Imogen knew that they would have been "Diet and Exercise."

\* \* \*

There is little more to tell of Imogen's story, but that little is happy. As the fatal morning of the culling wore on, it commenced to snow. By the time that Imogen, with long gashes in her hide from the barbed wire, had worked her way under the fence, the ground was covered with a fine carpet of feathery snow. By the double trail of footprints and of blood, Imogen led her pursuers through the snowy fields to the stand of willows, where she was discovered patiently nuzzling the frozen earth in pursuit of truffles.

The Squire was delighted. Not only did he find himself

unexpectedly possessed of a wealth of buried treasure—in the current market truffles were selling for exorbitant prices—additionally, he had a truffle pig that had only to be harnessed and ringed for her professional life to begin.

Imogen was at first dismayed to be prevented from enjoying the fruits of her own labor, but there were compensations. Each time she led the Squire's men to a new site she was rewarded with a luscious gobbet of rank cheese. If one closed one's eyes and concentrated on the all-pervading odor of the truffles, the cheese could almost be perceived as a truffle of some lower order. After a while Imogen came to forget exactly what the truffles had tasted like. The cheese was good, and the arduous work of digging was spared her. Indeed, with the ring in her nose it was quite impossible. Best of all, she led the privileged life of a prize boar, spared at each culling for the sake of her special gifts, a living testimony to the great benefits to be gained from a program of Diet and Exercise and the practice of Self-Control. ♦



# Love in the Land of Law



Alan Kirk

The litigation all started when I first laid eyes on Angie during a sunny afternoon at the Venice boardwalk; both of us, of course, with our lawyers in tow. As is customary in the initial contact phase, I sent my male lawyer over to begin negotiations for idle conversation rights with Angie's female lawyer. Angie's lawyer then communicated my overture to her.

Angie looked me up and down a couple of times before reconferencing with her attorney. That made me kind of nervous; but my uneasiness was overcome by the thrill of discovering a woman who knew how to strike a hard-edged negotiating posture. Then Angie allowed the hint of a smile to

Illustration by Bryn Barnard

cross her face—and I knew we'd taken the big plunge into pre-dating litigation.

I found out later that Angie was a traditional girl, which meant that I got a lot of exercise fishing for my wallet at her slightest whim. But I didn't mind, not at first. I had been yearning for a girl with traditional values. And Angie was from a solid family that had employed the same law firm for generations. I admire continuity of representation.

Meanwhile, our lawyers had commenced billing at their "relationship" rate. Thinking back on it now, I understand why they looked even happier than either Angie or I did.

After Angie and I had thumbprinted the Statement of Intention to Converse, our lawyers immediately jumped into action, taking ten paces back from each other, whipping out their pocket cellular phones, and then commencing to coordinate and conference and bill the hell out of the case.

Angie sat down on a bench on her side of the Boardwalk and I took up a similar station on my side. Within the hour, with any luck, we might be allowed to say hello. In the meantime, Angie and I studiously avoided each other's eyes, so as not to be charged with sexual harassment—it can go both ways. But despite the risk, I kept stealing peripheral glances at Angie; and during a couple of those peril-fraught surveillances I caught her doing the same thing. I took that as a good sign. I enjoy a little rebelliousness in a woman.

While Angie and I pushed the envelope of flirtation, our lawyers worked their way through a stack of American Bar Association Standard Attorney/Attorney Stipulations. When they finished with that, they activated the audio-video recording devices in their briefcases, officially introduced the parties, then stepped back a few feet to monitor the conversation—just to make sure it remained within all legal and ethical bounds.

"So," I said to Angie after the introduction and the hellos, "where'd you go to school?"

"Objection," said Angie's lawyer, stepping between us and getting right in my face. "The question might lead to the discovery of educational, social or religious background, which may provoke discriminatory thoughts."

I looked at my lawyer. He shrugged. I cast a glance at Angie and saw a triumphant smirk sneaking into the corners of her mouth. I'd lost the first round.

But Angie was a good sport about it and she broke the deadlock, taking an enormous chance by laying her cards on the table, face up. "Dinner will be considered adequate compensation for the injury you have perpetrated upon me." She sniffed delicately and raised her cute little nose into the air.

I nodded acceptance of her offer to settle informally, afraid to speak for fear of incurring further liability. Then I backed away. My lawyer got directions to the restaurant from her lawyer, then looked at me and pointed to his watch. I sighed, realizing that the statutory time limit for first encounters had been reached. Angie's lawyer picked up his briefcase and hustled his client away.

My lawyer tugged at my sleeve as I watched Angie disappear, whispering that my watching Angie's backside might be interpreted as lewd conduct. Lost in a hormonal

stupor, I allowed him to guide me away, only half-listening to the pre-dinner strategy rap he was laying on me.

\* \* \*

Dinner couldn't have been better—except for that one tense moment when, with a slip of the tongue, I skirted the boundaries of legislated good taste, almost disparaging Angie's ethnicity by mispronouncing *canard à l'orange* when I ordered dinner for her. It seems that one of her ancestors was Napoleon's Royal Buttonhole-Maker, and Angie was a little testy about people speaking French with a Los Angeles accent. That mispronunciation could have run me into some serious damages: emotional distress; disrespect for national origin; cruel and unusual—all really tough charges to beat.

But my lawyer was great. He jumped right in there and gave off Angie the Third Degree. During the on-the-spot deposition, he got Angie to admit that even *her* French pronunciation had been tainted by Canadian. This time I got to smirk, at Angie's expense.

After dinner I told my lawyer to go ahead and dump the Form Interrogatories on her, all three hundred of them. I'd show her who knew how to strategize.

But we didn't catch Angie half-asleep. Her lawyer immediately propounded not only Form Interrogatories, but Requests For Admissions and Demands For Identification And Production Of Computer Files. At that juncture, it was pretty obvious to me that Angie had been around the block at least a couple of times. But somehow that made her all the more desirable.

I spent the better part of the next two weeks responding to Angie's legal papers, photocopying my birth certificate, licenses, professional affiliation cards and the like, and responding in detail to every Interrogatory for which my lawyer couldn't come up with a frivolous objection. Then there were about ten revisions of everything and a few calls to co-counsel on the more touchy issues.

\* \* \*

Second date. Movie. Things were progressing nicely. Angie and I were sitting side by side in a darkened theater, our lawyers flanking us. I had finally gotten close enough to her to smell her perfume. Ah, bliss!

Our lawyers, meanwhile, were charging their regular inflated rates—and I had to buy *them* popcorn and soft drinks as well!

As a result of this budding relationship I was having to work overtime to pay my legal fees. The litigious flurry was good in one regard, because my lawyer had to leave me alone for a while each day while he dictated memoranda and bill descriptions. Those solitary moments were some of the best times of the relationship between Angie and me, times when I could just sit there and daydream about living happily ever after, and about forming a partnership with Angie to buy real property, and about maybe having kids that would grow up and go to law school.

Kids. That meant sex. Time for the Second Set of Interrogatories, the ones dealing with sexual practices, a minefield of potential conflict, the stage where many relationships flounder. My lawyer advised me to use the textbook boilerplate responses that most couples employ and later, if problems developed, try to negotiate a resolution. But I

really wanted to deviate from the norm, to take a chance, to somehow send a message to Angie that I was different from all the other guys. So against the advice of counsel, I told her about my desire to have sex with her while both of us were in plastic garbage bags with only our heads exposed.

That turned Angie on. She took a chance too, revealing that she had a thing about video cameras and kitchen tables.

Our lawyers were sharp enough to realize that it was time to close, that their retainer fees—which had been set by law—were about to be depleted.

And so Angie and I stipulated to marriage.

But two days later everything fell apart. Angie's lawyer brought in a pit bull of a prenuptial negotiator who rubbed my lawyer the wrong way. So my lawyer hired a couple of experts to psychoanalyze Angie's team of lawyers in an attempt to get them relieved as counsel. Angie's lawyers countered with a behind-the-back demand on my insurance company for indemnification, and actually went so

far as to file a Motion to Dismiss, *and* tried to hit *me* up for *their* attorneys' fees!

I could see that a trial would be costly. And I'd gone the appeals route before and lost, which had gouged a huge chunk out of my credit balance that had taken me years to replenish.

Then, when Angie's lawyer called my lawyer and said that Angie's mother was considering filing a friend-of-the-court brief in opposition to the marriage, the wind went out of my sails and I decided to cut my losses. So after a few more weeks of negotiating by our lawyers, Angie and I stipulated to a Mutual Release and Dissolution of Friendship.

Angie and I both ended up having to retain new counsel because our lawyers had fallen in love with each other, gotten married, and retired on their investments.

I never saw Angie again, but it was a great romance while it lasted. I highly recommend that everyone experience the emotional highs and lows of sexual litigation at least once in life. ♦

# AMAZING<sup>®</sup> STORIES

## Congratulates

### The 1992 HUGO AWARD Winners

Novel (tie)	<b>A Fire Upon the Deep</b> by Vernor Vinge
and	<b>Doomsday Book</b> by Connie Willis
Novella	<b>Barnacle Bill the Spacer</b> by Lucius Shepard
Novelette	<b>The Nutcracker Coup</b> by Janet Kagan
Short Story	<b>Even the Queen</b> by Connie Willis
Non-Fiction Book	<b>A Wealth of Fable: An informal history of science fiction fandom in the 1950s</b> by Harry Warner, Jr.

# A Formal Feeling Comes

Barry N. Malzberg

After great pain,  
a formal feeling comes.

—Emily Dickinson

Genre. Where would we science fictioners, mysterists and romanticists be without it, and yet at what price the sheltering storm? "Seeking to give us context, science fiction denies us context," my collaboratrice, the sullen and inestimable Kathe Koja says, and so it does.

In order to sell *Camp Concentration* as science fiction—and he had no other place to commission it or send it in the 1960s—Thomas Disch turned the virus which sharpened and rotted its narrator's brain into a reversible and controllable phenomenon.

In order to make *Quicksand* a viable commodity for the Doubleday science fiction editor who paid for it, John Brunner was compelled to drain the ambiguity from the mysterious mental patient treated by his dark and ferocious psychiatrist in the institution and make her an alien. Brunner's ambiguous set of theatrical players in his contemporaneous novel *The Productions of Time* (1967) were eventually defined for NAL's science fiction editor as aliens who, under their alien director, were seeking to take over our planet under the cloak of repertory theatre. Or something like that.

"It is *so* science fiction!" Harlan Ellison shouted at Robert Hoskins, the Lancer editor of the *Infinity* original anthologies when Hoskins said that "Pennies on a Dead Man's Eyes"

was a good story but not science fiction. "The guy's an alien! He's an alien!" (Didn't sell with Hoskins, who rejected it anyway. Ejler Jakobssen published it in *Galaxy*.)

The presence of the work within the context of science fiction forces presupposition upon the audience: what is the thing *doing* here unless it is fantastic or extrapolative? Slack-jawed, in search of ever newer wonders, the science fiction reader (don't blame me for this characterization, take it up with the James Blish estate; that is how he described his audience in "Issue at Hand") awaits the expected wonders in the story before him; if the eventual explanation does not push or place the story within the expected definition of the genre, the story—virtually by definition—will not be in *Stirring Wonder Tales* or *Beta Stories* #26, and the writer has been deprived, because of this necessity of that range of ambivalence, possibility or implication which can be (although all too often is not) part of the full range of technical possibility allowed by the writing of fiction.

This imposed necessity wrecked more of Alice Sheldon's work, I think, than we can ever know. Sheldon, one of the most powerful, subtle American writers of her time, wrote a great deal of remarkable science fiction but she also wrote a good many short stories—"The Women Men Don't See," "Morality Meat," even "The Screwfly Solution"—which bear the imposed gimmicks and contrived extrapolative resolutions of a writer

conscious of her markets and determined to sell there.

The strictures did Joanna Russ no particular good in *The Female Man* or its adumbrating "When It Changed"; the alienness of the backgrounds lowered the implication of the story.

In the later *Orbit* anthologies, of which there were twenty-one, Damon Knight did explore the limits and the possibilities, published a few stories which involved no extrapolative or technologically altered material at all, but this series of anthologies, in many ways an investigation of the ways in which expectations could be manipulated or deliberately tricked, lost sales, interest and any centrality through the last half of its issues and disappeared without attracting particular notice or regrets.

I think of Reginald Bretnor's "The Doorstop," a mysterious, ambiguous story (*Astounding*, November 1956; Merril's *Year's Best* in 1967 and reprinted in the 1956 edition of the Greenberg/Asimov retrospective best of the year anthologies for DAW) in which an unhappy, yearning, lost scientist deep in middle age discovers an artifact in his back yard strangely lit from within and possibly of alien origin. He turns it into the chemists and physicists for evaluation and finds that this thing which he calls "the doorstop" reawakens the vulnerability and depth of feeling which he had for science and for all human possibility so many years ago; the alienness of this artifact, perhaps a mysterious beacon from the stars, ac-



quaints him with his own sense of loss and slow reawakening. If this story were not in a science fiction magazine, it would have retained its tension and resonance until the end and perhaps beyond: is the thing indeed alien and does it beckon a way to the things beyond the stars? Or does this strange object function only as a means of mocking the scientist's fallen condition and his own gullibility and terrible sense of loss? It is a story which could have gone either way or could have backed from clear explanation, but the reader of *Astounding Science Fiction* or *Year's Best Science Fiction* knows that there will have to be closure, and that closure will make explicit the alien origin of the artifact (in this case it is a signal device and rapid corrosion indicates that the aliens will be returning very soon) and the relative objectivity of the scientist's response.

This is a subtle story by a good writer (Bretnor never really got his due, but then again very few writers get what they deserve unless they get more than they deserve; and the issue of misjudgement, the follies of underestimation no longer interest me as they did a decade or two ago and perhaps they do not interest me at all) and its effects are carefully calculated but they are wasted; the provenance of the story takes away all sense of mystery, just as the fact that Tiptree's "Beam Us Home" appeared in a science fiction magazine ensures that the protagonist is an astronaut wrecked in orbit, dying, and not the kid who watched *Star Trek* become as child or adult utterly dislocated from reality. Again, the provenance of the story has managed to deny the central effect which it might have sought.

This is clearly a problem; it is why people like Leslie Fiedler or John Updike, Edmund Wilson or Anatole Broyard have always greeted with contempt and hollow laughter the more florid assertions of science fiction writers and readers that this is the true quill, the central literature of the age, the stuff of the post-technological era and the true myths of our golden and engineering age. Yes and no, as the literary agent said; yes in that science fiction by definition and history is better able than any other

literary form to refract what is going on as human functioning and destiny has been placed at the mercy of technology but *no* in that science fiction, in order to retain its categorical integrity, must cut off a whole range, perhaps the greater range, of solutions and explorations.

Updike (reviewing the David Hartwell Book-of-the-Month Club science fiction anthology a couple of years ago) stated in *The New Yorker* that science fiction was doomed, regardless of its genius and the high caliber of some of its writers, to being a second-rate form eternally because it must of necessity lean upon the extrapolative and impossible. This is not so, it is not exactly the issue at all, but it is fair to say that the science fiction *markets*, the integrity and nature of the genre itself have forced those conclusions upon the writers. It might be possible to open up science fiction or for that matter fantasy and to work it through to levels of ambiguity or projective possibility barely glimpsed; but how this could be done and managed within a generic format geared wholly to audience expectation is not only beyond Updike, it is quite beyond me.

"This is a good novel and I'd love to publish it," John W. Campbell said in a note to Brunner's agent, Joseph Elder, when *Productions of Time* was offered to *Analog* in 1966. "But I see no way that I could do so; there is absolutely no science fiction, nothing at all until past the halfway point and then the science fiction seems irrelevant to the story." Who said that Campbell had lost his editorial grip by the mid-sixties? (Heaven forfend that I had.) His response showed acute insight into Brunner's problem and heroic solution; Brunner wanted to write a mainstream novel but couldn't get a contract and probably couldn't sell it, wrote half of one anyway, then backed and filled and cheated and fudged so that NAL would publish the novel as science fiction and not give him any trouble.

It is clearly a problem, not perhaps the worst which the revered old field has had but one which is signatory; it has chased that diminished form which we call modern science fiction (the encroachments of fantasy, fabu-

lation and the spinoff televised novel have reduced genre science fiction to something of a special interest within its own categorization) toward formats of jargon and wired futures which impose from the outset a dislocation, a sense of difference so vast that generic requirements are fulfilled at the outset and the writer then feels some relative freedom to induce levels of ambiguity as shifting areas of extrapolation. Good enough, I suppose, but intensely limiting and tending to drive the work toward a kind of parochialism, a specialty of jargon and reference which keeps out the marginal reader or confuses those on the borders; impossible to theorize much beyond this, but if readership of genre science fiction (as opposed to fantasy, *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* imitations and series novels) is indeed less in absolute numbers than was the case twenty years ago, these impositions might function as part of the explanation. And then again perhaps they would not; the critic being offered a sense of ambiguity, an appreciation of ambivalence which has been denied the fictioneer.

But what, then, ultimately is left? Some radical critics and theologians, among whom I do not include myself (although it composes a vast yearning to do so), have theorized that after the Holocaust, modern assimilative institutionalized Judaism in this country was finished, there was simply no way after Hitler and the ovens and the six millions that the rabbis could sell to those parts of the middle class which still paid any attention to the synagogues the proposal that being a good, a practicing, a faithful Jew had anything at all to do with the true nature of contemporary life. As a friend of mine proposed, "After the Holocaust, there are only two kinds of Jews left: those who are atheists and those who cannot take a hint." Still, the synagogues were there, the institutions were in place, the rituals and customs and engines of this mainstream Judaism were still there and necessitous, something had to be done.

For those institutions and because true religiosity and faith had become evidently something irrelevant or to

be mocked, what were left were the triune stanchions: Hitler, the Holocaust, and Israel. Israel became the engine which drove the diaspora in the United States; the spectre of Hitler, revived and sweeping across the lands, necessitated a place of exile; and of course the Holocaust as rehearsal for even greater disasters. These three factors became the machinery of modern Reform and Conservative Judaism, which in the absence of a credible, saleable religious creed or basis of belief needed all the help and all of the spectators that they could get. "The spirit killeth but the letter giveth life," Thomas Stearns Eliot wrote (in one of the *Four Quartets*) more than half a century ago; and the letter became the Israeli bond appeal, Nasser, Saddam Hussein, Yasir Arafat and anyone else who could be called to mind.

A cynical and despairing view of a cynical and despairing time, and perhaps not wholly true, but what else could keep the synagogues going? The faith of the Kabbalistic kings, the holy orders of the *sbtetl*, the beloved *rebbe*, the believing and faithful *tzaddik* in Talmudic garb committed to the restoration of the law? The Last of the Just had been loaded into the ovens, as Andre Schwartz-Bart's great novel noted; in his absence the idea of Justice was a very, very difficult sell indeed.

Trivializing as it may be, unjust (and perhaps blasphemous) as it might be to juxtapose, one could make something of the same call on science fiction. Something happened to science fiction at about the time of the Apollo missions, something which was

the culmination of many visible technological failures and misapprehensions: Hiroshima, germ warfare, nuclear shelters, television, napalm, Vietnam, the disastrous Apollo 13. Perhaps the future was not benign, perhaps the fundamental posture of science fiction—that the future would work and humanity, by so accommodating itself to extrapolative forces and their implication was educable, could be improved, could be changed and expanded in meaningful ways—was wrong.

Perhaps genre science fiction as agonizingly developed through *Amazing* and *Thrilling Wonder* and Campbell and Gold and the literary and extrapolative adventures of the decades was in error, the fundamental assumptions were wrong, the future made no sense whatsoever, there were no causes but only causal linkages, and even Kuttner's blundering robots or Kornbluth's blasted astronauts or draftees were imprisoned by assumptions of ultimate honor which simply did not exist. Even the dystopians and bearers of alarm who had run through the streets of the city hand in hand with the prophets of different kinds had believed in the practical value of their craft and the existence of favorable alternatives (even though people and institutions were too stupid to accept them).

But what if the whole deal was wrong? What if the corrupt, blackened little heart of science fiction had at last been first seen and then removed and then in the cold, stricken, despicable light of Apollo 13, Watergate, the collapse of institutions and the abandonment of its audience to its

own devices been revealed to be as much of a lie as Gernsback's promise in 1926 to educate young boys toward scientific careers? What then?

Well, *what* then? *Star Trek* of course and *Star Wars* and the consequences of the Tolkien rediscovery of the mid-sixties which had flung out the detritus of elves and dwarves and imitative work through the decade and which now, in the mid-seventies, began to overtake science fiction itself, lightweight, heartless, corrupt, revealed old science fiction which had neither the means nor the certainty to fight back. In the empty space left by the wreckage of the 13th Apollo, in the chasm through which the splinters of the spent *Challenger* fell and fell and fell, what was left to take up that space but the elves, dragons, Skywalkers and Kirks which had been imported from movies, television, Tolkien or the common folk wisdom of the media and placed in those places where science fiction had been? The rabbis had no ethic for post-Holocaust Judaism; they had little explanation or rationale for the death of the Last of the Just either. What they had was the Israeli bond appeal, the travelogue of the Nazarene and the ever-available specter of Hitler now repaying some of his awful culpability by functioning as the best fund raiser the synagogue and the Anti-Defamation League of the B'nai Brith ever had.

Well, it is all very interesting and speculative. Of course science fiction and Judaism have nothing, *nothing* whatsoever to do with one another. Nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing! Where it comes down is not my department, said Werner von Braun. ♦

# Brown Dwarfs and Superplanets

Stephen L. Gillett

What's the difference between a star and a planet? Sure, naive laypersons may ask that, but all SF people surely know! Stars are large and self-luminous; planets are small and don't put out their own light.

But in fact it's a trick question. The distinction gets fuzzy in detail; even a small, rocky planet like the Earth, after all, is radiating a *little* energy, just from its cooling off. It's very cool, to be sure—the Earth is a “star” in the far microwave region—but it *is* radiating energy it did not receive originally from the Sun. (Some of Earth's internal heat is accumulated gravitational energy, still left over from its accretion 4.5 billion years ago; the rest comes from the decay of long-lived radioactive elements.)

Jupiter, much bigger than the Earth, is radiating even more strongly as it slowly loses its internal heat. And something much bigger than Jupiter, but still too small for the hydrogen-fusion fires to ignite in its core, would radiate energy for a long, long time, glowing dimly like dying coals in a campfire.

Such bodies are called brown dwarfs—BDs for short. Are they stars or planets? That depends on your definition; of course, they don't put out energy from nuclear reactions, but they're still shining by light of their own! Scientists seem to be agreeing on a working definition, though: a brown dwarf forms like a star—that is, it forms directly from a collapsing “giant molecular cloud” (see my column in the August 1993 issue)—but

is too small to carry out hydrogen fusion in its core. By contrast, planets form out of matter that's lost at least some of its hydrogen and helium, because they're formed in a nebula that was “cooked out” by the nearness of a growing star. Even Jupiter, rich as it is in hydrogen and helium, has more heavier elements than the Sun.

Where's the cutoff for stardom, then? As we'll see it's a bit vague, but the limit for sustained hydrogen fusion seems to be about 8.5% of the Sun's mass, or about 85 Jupiter masses. There are a couple of complications, though: brown dwarfs may too get some energy from nuclear reactions, at least for a while.

For one thing, deuterium, or heavy hydrogen (H-2), makes up about 0.002% of the hydrogen in the Universe, and it fuses much more easily than ordinary hydrogen. It's quite possible for an object to be big enough for the deuterium to fuse, but not big enough for ordinary hydrogen to fuse. So an object of this size can shine like a “real” star for a bit—but it's a flash in the pan. The nuclear fires die away without causing anything else to happen, like charcoal lighter fluid flaming off wet wood. Even at best, a brown dwarf fuses deuterium for only about ten million years. It's not enough to make any difference in its ultimate evolution.

The minimum mass for deuterium fusion is about 1.5% of a Sun. Most scientists think brown dwarfs a bit smaller than this could occur, as star-forming processes should be able to

make BDs with 1% or even less of a solar mass. Perhaps not much less, though—and if there *is* a minimum size, it's hard to account for much “missing mass” in the Universe with brown dwarfs; but more on that later.

For the other complication, hydrogen burning doesn't start suddenly at a particular stellar mass. There's a transition region, from maybe 7% of a solar mass upward, where hydrogen can start slowly fusing. The extra energy so produced can delay the cooling of the brown dwarf for billions of years. Ultimately, however, even the fusion isn't great enough to keep the star from cooling off, and it collapses into brown-dwarfhood. For a large brown dwarf, though, this takes longer than the age of the Galaxy! So there's really no well-defined point at which an object becomes a “star” instead of a brown dwarf.

The exact mass of these threshold points, as well as the rate at which the brown dwarf cools, depends on how opaque the object is—its “opacity.” The more opaque, the lower the mass limits, and the longer the cooling times. For an obvious reason: just like a blanket, opaque gases keep the heat inside the star. Brown dwarfs are likely to have rather opaque atmospheres because they're cool enough to contain lots of molecules, which might even form clouds. They might even be dusty, with fine particles of iron metal or silicates (rocks) precipitated out of the air like ice crystals in Earth's atmosphere.

By the way, even when brown

dwarfs (and the very low-mass stars they grade imperceptibly into) fuse hydrogen, they don't "burn" hydrogen quite the way the Sun does. The burning is partial. Stars like the Sun ultimately fuse four hydrogens into one nucleus of helium-4. Very small stars, though, can't go quite that far. The hydrogen is only fused to helium-3, with 2 protons but only one neutron.

Can we see any brown dwarfs? Well, that's the rub. Despite the fact that most astronomers believe BDs should be among the most common objects in the Galaxy, we've observed only a couple of candidates. The big problem is that they're *dim*. Depending on their mass, they start out with temperatures around 1000 to 3000 kelvins—between the temperature of a floor heater and an incandescent filament—and then they cool. By the time it's a few billion years old (the age of the Earth) a small brown dwarf will have a temperature of less than 600 kelvins, cooler than a warm stove.

Furthermore, most of their light is in the infrared; like a space heater or a light bulb, they put out much more heat than light. Obviously, it's going to be easier to look for BDs with infrared telescopes, and in fact quite a number of astronomers are doing just that right now. Equally obviously, higher-mass BDs are going to be easier to find. Not only do they start out brighter, they stay brighter longer, especially if they're in the transition zone to true stars. And, not surprisingly, the brown dwarf candidates we do have are all in the region where they're transitional to small stars.

A brown dwarf would be a great setting for an SF story. As I mentioned last month, one possibility is a brown dwarf as part of a binary system, with an Earthlike planet at a Trojan (Lagrange 4 or Lagrange 5) point in the orbit. From that distance, the brown dwarf would look like a bright star. It wouldn't show a disk. The star would be visible in daytime, though, which would no doubt inspire many tales and legends.

A perhaps more interesting possibility is an Earthlike planet circling a brown dwarf, where the brown dwarf

in turn circles another star. Poul Anderson suggested many years ago that such a situation could go a long ways toward making Earthlike planets possible in systems where they otherwise couldn't exist.

This would work as follows. Just as the Moon always keeps one face toward the Earth, due to the action of the Earth's tides over geologic time, the Earthlike planet would keep one face toward the brown dwarf. So, just as the Sun rises and sets on the Moon as it goes around the Earth in its orbit, sunrise and sunset would occur on the Earthlike planet, even though its primary, the brown dwarf, wouldn't change its position in the sky.

Why is this useful? Because, for stars much dimmer than the Sun, an Earthlike planet would have to be in so close to get enough illumination that the tides from the star itself would have locked the planet's rotation. Before radio telescope observations were made about 1965, this was thought to be the case with Mercury in our own System; it was thought to present just one face to the Sun. Obviously this is not the optimal situation for an Earthlike world!

The reason tidal locking would happen at an Earthlike level of illumination around a dim star is that the luminosity of stars drops off much more quickly than their mass. Thus, the planet would be far deeper in the planet's gravitational well, proportionately, than Earth is in Sol's.

But a planet orbiting a brown dwarf is dominated by the dwarf's gravity, just as the Moon is by the Earth's. So sunrise and sunset would occur, just as they do on the Moon. And thus, the brown dwarf might make it possible for an Earthlike planet to exist around a much dimmer star than could ordinarily be the case. As most stars are much dimmer than the Sun, anything that makes them better bets for life is helpful!

The brown dwarf would be so massive that the orbital period of the Earthlike planet could be much shorter than a lunar month, too. For example, for a small brown dwarf with 1% of the Sun's mass, the 1-day orbital period is at 631,000 kilometers—about the distance of Europa from Jupiter.

From the planet, the dwarf would appear almost 11 degrees across, 22 times the width of the Sun or full Moon: a vast ball perhaps glowing deep, dull red, with streamers and wisps of darker clouds and possibly storms and belts like Jupiter's.

In fact, at the upper end of the brown dwarf range, where they're transitional to small stars, the luminosity of the brown dwarf itself might make this scenario awkward. The dwarfs take so long to cool that even over a few billion years the luminosity doesn't change much. For example, a planet in a one-day orbit around a brown dwarf with 8% of the Sun's mass would receive more heat from the dwarf than it would from its Sun, assuming an Earthlike level of sunlight from the parent star.

On the other hand, of course, this could instead lead to some interesting variations. A planet in a 1-day orbit around a brown dwarf with 7% of the Sun's mass, for example, would receive something like 6% as much heat from the dwarf as from its sun. That need not be a show-stopper. It might in fact lead to interesting climate variations: one hemisphere is permanently heated more than the other, at a low level to be sure, but even small variations can have large climatic effects. And no doubt profound sociological effects, too! Consider the consequences for religion and legend if only one side of a world has a second, dim star, for example.

Well, at least a few brown dwarfs might host some interesting real estate. But what's the significance of them otherwise? They may be part of the solution of the dark matter problem. What's "dark matter"? Anything that doesn't shine! Or at least shine brightly. People, planets, asteroids, dust . . . they're all dark matter in an astronomical sense.

And what's the dark matter problem? Actually, there are a couple of problems. The first (and simplest) is that galaxies seem to contain quite a bit more mass than we actually see. We can tell this by the orbital motions of stars (and, outside the Galaxy proper, of such things as globular clusters). Their orbital speeds are too fast for the obvious (i.e., luminous) matter in the part of the galaxy they're

orbiting. In the solar neighborhood, for example, anywhere from a third to two-thirds or so of the matter is thought to be invisible. In the Galaxy as a whole, fully 90% of the matter may be invisible, based on such data as the globular clusters' orbits.

Brown dwarfs—lots of them—can explain this missing mass, and in fact they're probably the current favorite explanation. One paper estimates there are 6 brown dwarfs within half a parsec of the Sun! (For comparison, the nearest star, Alpha Centauri, is 1.3 parsecs away.) There's a fly in the ointment, though: this assumes the distribution of masses formed from interstellar clouds is continuous down to 0.3% the mass of the Sun—to objects only three times the size of Jupiter. Since, for stars, the smaller they are, the more of them they are, this means that most of the mass of a condensing cloud ends up in very small objects. However, as I mentioned, other scientists have postulated a "cutoff" mass around 1% of the Sun; below this, brown dwarfs just don't get made.

In other words, to explain the Galaxy's missing mass with brown dwarfs, you need to be able to make them very efficiently indeed—and it's possible they just don't form that efficiently.

The second dark-matter problem is on a much grander scale: The Cosmological Problem of the Missing Mass. To see the cosmological problem, we have to detour into cosmology. It's been known since Edwin Hubble discovered it in the late 1920s that distant galaxies are retreating from us, and the farther the galaxy, the faster it's retreating. The simplest way to explain this observation is that the Universe is expanding, and many scientists think the expansion

—indeed, the Universe—started in a vast explosion, the Big Bang, about 15 billion years ago.

But all matter has gravity, and so the gravity of all the matter in the Universe is slowing down the expansion due to its mutual attraction, just as an object thrown up from the Earth is slowed by Earth's gravity. If the object is thrown hard enough, though, it will never slow down enough to fall back.

Now, here is the cosmological "dark matter problem:" If the matter we can observe astronomically, which we maybe could call the "shining" matter, is all added up, it's less than 10% what would be required to stop the Universe's expansion. Even the dark matter in the galaxies doesn't help significantly. In other words, if the shining matter is essentially all the matter there is, the Universe will expand forever. It's a one-shot deal.

If, on the other hand, there's enough dark matter, the Universe is "closed": the expansion will slow down and at some point in the future halt; then the Universe will fall together again, possibly to trigger a new Big Bang. (A scenario that Poul Anderson treated in his novel *Tau Zero*.)

Unfortunately, it doesn't appear that brown dwarfs can solve this problem (or "can close the Universe," as the cosmologists say). In fact, if the Universe *is* closed, it doesn't seem that ordinary matter can do it at all—at least if the current Big Bang models are anywhere near right.

Why? A couple of reasons. First, a lot of hydrogen fusion takes place right after the Big Bang, which means lots of helium-4 gets made. In fact, the 25% or so of helium in the Universe is mostly left over from the Big Bang. Stars haven't processed enough

additional hydrogen into helium to notice.

Cosmologists can calculate, though, how much helium should get made as a by-product of the Big Bang. It turns out if there was enough matter left to close the Universe, too much of it gets turned into helium—far more than the 25% we see. (The proportions of the other atoms formed by "primordial" nucleosynthesis—such things as deuterium and lithium-7—also change drastically.)

The second reason is that the Universe quickly gets too "clumpy" if there's too much ordinary matter. But the "cosmic background radiation"—the microwave signal still left over from the Big Bang itself—is nearly uniform. It wouldn't be if matter had started to clump so early.

So, cosmologists and their accomplices in particle physics have proposed a whole zoo of exotica, weird particles with names like WIMPs, axions, gravitons, and so forth, to account for the "missing" mass. (This, of course, assumes that the Universe really *isn't* a one-shot deal, for which the evidence is not terribly compelling.) But so far none of these things has been observed.

But even if brown dwarfs can't close the Universe, they really aren't so dull as their name and their dimness suggests. The mass of myriads of brown dwarfs probably has a lot to do with how galaxies appear and behave as they do—with important consequences for the stability of the galaxies, and hence their fitness for life. And, of course, brown dwarfs are an underutilized setting for SF stories; especially since it's likely the closest object to the Solar System is not another star but a brown dwarf. ♦



Looking Forward:

# Under the Eye of God

by David Gerrold

Coming in December 1993 from Bantam Books

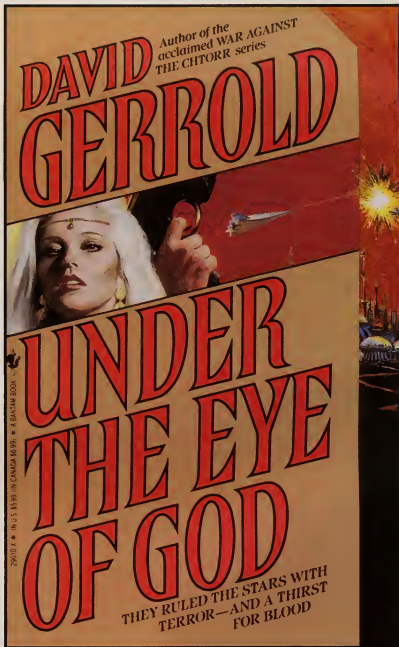
*Introduction by Bill Fawcett*

This is a vibrantly written, darkly beautiful novel with characters who will both amaze and intrigue you. A thousand years before the time of the story, all of the humans in the Cluster orbiting below our galaxy (the Eye of God) faced near certain destruction and put themselves under the command of the predatory mutants they had named the Vampires. Now that the earlier menace has not resurfaced for five hundred years, the Vampires have reacted to their subjects' wish to be free again by making a demand of total power. Fiercer and harsher than men, the Vampires suppress any resistance with cruelty and destruction. Still, their losses have been heavy and their hold on the races of the Cluster has become tenuous. Fortunately for humankind, as is shown in the scene that follows, the Vampires are also their own worst enemies.

The Pavilion of Night appeared to float high above the distant red-baked sands.

Towering panels of diamond-flecked obsidian outlined the hall. Tall windows opened out onto the distant desert floor so very far below. The lights of the rift-city glimmered softly on the horizon. The forelog of the Eye of God had already begun to light up the edge of the world, and the entire vista had taken on a peaceful, desolate quality that only a Vampire's eyes could truly appreciate.

Lady Zillabar took her time admiring the view and collecting her thoughts. She wanted to let the others stew for a long terrifying moment in their own anxiety, but at the moment she didn't have the patience. She still carried too much anger and frustration; she had to let it out *now*. Despite her temporary return to dreamtime, she knew that she still remained



Cover art by Kask

much too irritable. She would have to keep this meeting short.

Abruptly, she turned to Khallanin, to d'Vashti, to Drydel, and to the Dragon Lord. "The TimeBinder on Burihatin appears to have died—or so my sources believe. Unfortunately, this death apparently did not occur in circumstances conducive to our goals. We have not yet found the headband. The officers who accepted the assignment of procuring the headband did not complete their mission satisfactorily—they have also died." She looked to each of them in turn; her piercing gaze stabbed from one to the next. "I hope that you will have much better news for me . . . ?"

The Dragon Lord did not react. He yawned deliberately. He knew the Lady would never threaten him. She didn't have the power to hurt him. He examined one steel claw abstractedly. Beside him Drydel waited silently. Nor did Lord Khallanin speak.

Kernel d'Vashti kept both of his faces impassive, the inner as well as the outer. He would not demonstrate any weakness of any kind. He would not volunteer anything. He would wait passively and allow the Lady herself to control the course of the discussion; in that way he would control her—by letting her have her way.

Lady Zillabar moved to a glowing couch and settled herself gracefully onto its evanescence. Again she became hard to look at, hard to see clearly. Lord Drydel moved behind the Lady, to stand as protector and Consort. She glanced up at him with only casual affection, then she looked across the room at d'Vashti and said, by way of small talk, "I trust that you have taken the appropriate care of my vessel. As I recall . . . ?" She let her sentence trail off into ominous silence.

d'Vashti returned her cold smile with an expression equally polite. He ignored the Lady's sly implication. He had not *deliberately* subverted the maintenance of her powerful war-cruiser; he had simply allowed the occurrence of a few small logistical delays, enough so as to ensure that the completion of several necessary modifications would not transpire in time for the Lady's mission to Burihatin. A number of important replacement modules had mysteriously become unavailable. And the personnel who could have installed them in time had prior commitments elsewhere. d'Vashti had thought to neutralize some of the Lady's grander ambitions, at least temporarily, by delaying her departure from Thoska-Roole and allowing him time to complete his own schemes. His plan had almost worked.

Had d'Vashti's subtle efforts not subverted the Lady's intentions, the resources of her flagship would have given her efforts at Burihatin a significant advantage; instead the lack of those resources had seriously crippled her efforts. Under her original plan, she would have had the authority of her personal guard to enforce her wishes on the moons of the great ringed world, but her inability to provide transportation for them on her personal warship had brought her instead to a dependency on the sympathies of Burihatin's local authority. d'Vashti had believed this made the possibilities of success in the matter problematic.

d'Vashti had expected her to recognize that. He'd expected her to cancel or postpone her trip. Instead, the Lady had secretly shifted her plans and secured other transportation—*lesser* transportation—and slipped away into the dark between the stars. She had opted for secrecy, and . . . exactly as d'Vashti had predicted, she had failed.

Now she had returned with vengeance in her mouth.

The Lady knew of his efforts on her behalf—and she hated him for those efforts. But, he wondered, *did she hate him enough?*

d'Vashti put on his sincerest outer manner, the one he always used for dissembling. "You may rest easy, Lady Zillabar. The previous state of affairs no longer maintains. We have punished the parties responsible. Those who failed to live up to the standards you require will no longer have the honor of working in your Stardock. As long as I have the privilege of this responsibility, you will never again have to suffer the indignity of seeking an alternate conveyance for your desires." Behind the Lady, Drydel frowned at this double-edged reference. d'Vashti noticed the other's displeasure only in passing. "Your vessel now stands ready to carry you to the far reaches of the Cluster—and beyond—if you so choose."

"And . . . what punishment did you apply to those who failed?" the Lady asked with only the faintest show of interest.

"They fed the Dragons," d'Vashti replied. "A task they executed with no small enthusiasm."

"Yes. I can imagine."

The Dragon Lord belched loudly. Neither the Lady Zillabar, nor Lord Drydel, nor Kernel d'Vashti acknowledged his comment. Lord Khallanin looked as if he had fallen asleep; d'Vashti would have bet otherwise.

The Lady's gaze remained fixed on the rival of her Consort. She understood the subtext of these events even better than the participants. Idly, almost casually, she let the nails of her right hand trace a delicate course up and down the line of her exposed cleavage. Precisely as she intended, the action drew d'Vashti's instant attention. She smiled inwardly. She could control this man. That made him worthy only of her contempt. She stroked herself meaningfully; she would arouse him to the point of lustful irresponsibility . . . and then she would rebuke him; a rebuke of deliberate sexual fury and rejection that would inflict the most painful sting.

d'Vashti's eyes followed the movements of her fingertips. But he did not react as the Lady intended. He had prepared for this meeting by dosing himself with an especially powerful restricting agent. Let the Lady wonder at her inability to arouse him and it just might increase his mystery to her, and eventually his attraction as well.

Abruptly tiring of this ebb and flow of subtext, Lord Khallanin looked up and waved a slender finger at someone unseen. A servant-wasp appeared instantly from behind a screen, wheeling a silver cart before it. On the cart stood slender winglasses and a decanter of frothy pink liquid. "Would you care for some refreshment, m'Lady?"

Zillabar ignored the invitation, her gaze still focused on d'Vashti. Her eyes narrowed suspiciously—she under-

stood immediately. d'Vashti had made himself immune to her sexual pheromones. By so doing, he displayed not only his intention of independence, but he implied a greater insult as well—that he might not choose to mate with her, even if given the opportunity. The Lady considered these subtle taunts a very dangerous game. And yet—d'Vashti clearly understood that she found *danger* stimulating.

Drydel had recognized it too. He placed one hand gently on the Lady's shoulder. She acknowledged the gesture by glancing backward at him; then she allowed her diamond-tipped claws to slice delicately across the back of his hand. The gesture had a twofold meaning; she demonstrated ownership of his affections at the same time as she rebuked his impulsiveness. To Drydel's credit he left his hand on the Lady's shoulder, even though delicate beads of blood appeared where her nails had drawn their edges.

Watching, d'Vashti wondered if this time, perhaps, her nails contained a poisonous essence. One day soon, he knew, she would tire of Drydel—but Drydel wouldn't know it until *after* the stricture had closed his throat for the last time.

They waited in silence, each studying the others, while the servant-wasp poured the wine into the goblets. The creature wheeled the cart around for each to select a glass. The Dragon Lord waved her away, but the four Vampires each helped themselves.

"A toast, perhaps?" d'Vashti invited the Lady.

"Give me something to toast," she demanded icily.

Here d'Vashti made a mistake. He should have let the matter drop. Instead, he allowed the merest fragment of his ambition to show; he said, "The service of Lord Khallanin's people, perhaps? Surely their performance has brought you satisfaction and pleasure?"

"The performance of your Lord's servants . . . ?" The Lady pretended to consider the thought. "The servants' performance always reflects that of the master, Kernel d'Vashti. Don't you agree?" The faintest edge of metal appeared in her voice.

d'Vashti nodded. "As always, your words ring true."

"Yes, thank you," she said. "I would apply the word *adequate* here, as an appropriate descriptor of the performance of your master and his servants."

d'Vashti realized his error too late. He had given the Lady an opportunity to rebuke himself and his Lord—and in front of a wasp! Why not just announce it to the entire world? He bridled at her delicately phrased assault, but he held his silence and waited stiffly for her to continue.

The Lady Zillabar placed her wineglass on a table, the wine still untouched. "Have you located the TimeBinder of Thoska-Roole yet?" she demanded of Lord Khallanin.

The Prefect sipped from his goblet, appearing unconcerned. He had ignored the Lady's insult. What else could he do? He met her angry glare with equanimity. "The work proceeds. The task carries many complications."

"Your answer lacks certainty," the Lady replied.

d'Vashti put aside his own wine, untasted. He spoke up aggressively. "We have several historians in custody. Before many more days pass, we shall have the TimeBinder as well."

"Oh?" The Lady raised her eyebrow skeptically. "And from where does all this confidence arise?" She exchanged a laughing glance with Lord Drydel. Drydel's eyes flashed with merriment as well as a suggestion of unashamed lust. But targeted at whom? Did Zillabar see it too? d'Vashti wondered again at Drydel's occupations.

Annoyed, he pushed the thought aside and turned his attention back to the Lady's question. "We have implemented an absolute security net. I believe you encountered it on your final approach. The forces of our most powerful ally—" Here d'Vashti nodded gracefully to the Dragon Lord. The Lord of All Things Black and Beautiful merely grunted in response. d'Vashti continued, "—have done an excellent job of establishing and maintaining a global containment. Nothing goes up or down that they do not control it. In addition, we have authorized a generous bounty. I doubt that you shall have to wait much longer, my Lady."

"I should not have to wait at all," she said, furiously standing. d'Vashti expected her to confront him, but instead she advanced directly on the highest law of the land, the Prefect of Thoska-Roole. "I expected that you would have captured the eye-damned TimeBinder by now, Lord Khallanin. You've had more than long enough. How do you waste my resources?"

Suddenly, d'Vashti understood the elegance of the Lady's mind. She knew that d'Vashti's maneuvers had brought them all to this point, but instead of attacking d'Vashti directly, she would destroy his protector and leave the real architect naked, humiliated, and powerless to do more. d'Vashti realized with horror that if she dared to assault the Prefect directly, then she must have progressed much further in her own ambitions that he'd thought possible. d'Vashti had privately regarded the Lady's goals as unrealistic and unreachable. Now he wondered just what else she had accomplished on Butihat. ♦

# Tomorrow's Books

## December 1993 Releases



Compiled by Susan C. Stone  
and Bill Fawcett

**Steven Barnes: *Firedance*** Tor SF, hc, 384 pp, \$21.95. This sequel to *Streetlethal* and *Gorgon Child* continues the adventures of street fighter Aubry Knight in devastated, near-future Los Angeles.

**Steven Barnes: *Gorgon Child*** Tor SF, pb reiss, 352 pp, \$3.95. Sequel to *Streetlethal*. Series tie-in reissue to support the new hardcover, *Firedance*.

**Nick Baron: *The Nightmare Club*** #7: *Slay Ride* Z-Fave YA Horror, pb orig, 224 pp, \$3.50. When a teenage girl wishes a bunch of jocks who are sexually harassing her would disappear, a mysterious guardian angel begins to murder them, one by one.

**Cynthia Blair: *Dark Moon Legacy*** #3: *The Rebellion* Harper YA Horror, pb orig, 320 pp, \$3.99. In the third adventure in this series, Garth and Miranda are lured into a deadly ceremony.

**Robert Bloch, editor: *Psycho-Paths*** Tor Horror, 1st time in pb, 320 pp, \$4.99. An anthology of 17 horror stories about mad killers.

**Ben Bova: *Peacekeepers*** Tor Tech-nothriller, pb rep, 384 pp, \$4.95. In the 21st century, the U.S. and Russia join forces to create the International Peace-keeping Force, responsible for controlling military satellites and preventing nuclear war. But the Peacekeepers are resented as well as feared. . . .

**Ben Bova & A. J. Austin: *To Save***

*The Sun* Tor SF, 1st time in pb, 384 pp, \$4.99. When scientists of the Empire of the Hundred Worlds discover that the Sun of their ancient homeworld, Earth, is going to explode, they search for a plan to save the Sun . . . and save humanity from stagnation.

**Elizabeth H. Boyer: *Black Lynx*** Del Rey Fantasy, pb orig, 272 pp, \$4.99. Sequel to *The Clan of the Warlord*. The witch-girl Skylla and the wild boy Jafnar use magic and their wits against the curse of the Dark Elves.

**Patricia Briggs: *Masques*** Ace Fantasy, pb orig, 208 pp, \$4.50. A first novel about a shapechanger, and her efforts to protect her people from an evil master of illusion and his army of undead.

**Orson Scott Card: *Lost Boys*** Harper Fiction, 1st time in pb, 544 pp, \$5.99. In this horror novel by bestselling SF & fantasy author Orson Scott Card, evil strikes out in a small town, and little boys vanish one by one.

**Michael Cecilione: *Domination*** Zebra Horror, pb orig, 448 pp, \$4.50. A lady vampire opens a trendy nightclub where people can act out their most dangerous erotic fantasies.

**David Cook: *Soldiers of Ice*** TSR Fantasy, pb orig, 320 pp, \$4.95. Volume 7 of the FORGOTTEN REALMS® Harpers Series. On his first big assignment as a Harper, Martine of Sembia inadvertently traps a deadly ice creature in a quiet valley. To her horror, it teams up with a horde of gnomes to threaten a nearby gnome village.

**Rick Cook: *Mall Purchase Night*** Baen Fantasy, pb orig, 352 pp, \$4.99. A fantasy adventure about a shopping mall built on an elven power source where there's a gateway between Elfland and Earth.

**Rick Cook: Author tie-in reissue of the author's three previous books.**

*Wizard's Bane*, 320 pp, \$4.99.

*The Wizardry Compiled*, 320 pp, \$4.95.

*The Wizardry Cursed*, 400 pp, \$4.95. **Jack Dann & Gardner Dozois, editors: *Invaders!*** Ace SF, pb orig, 256 pp, \$4.50. An anthology of 15 short stories about alien invasions.

**David Darke: *Necromaniacs*** Pinnacle Horror, pb orig, 320 pp, \$4.50. In high school, they were a group of misfits and outcasts who reveled in forbidden sex and black magic. And when they meet again at their reunion they do more than raise hell—they raise the dead.

**Ellen Datlow & Terri Windling, editors: *Snow White, Blood Red*** Avon Nova Fantasy, 1st time in pb, 432 pp, \$4.99. An anthology of dark and disturbing fairy tales for adults.

**Peter David: *Alien Nation*** #3: *Body and Soul* Pocket SF, pb orig, 288 pp, \$5.50. In this novel based on the teleplay for an episode that was never aired, Sikes and Francisco investigate reports of the birth of the first half-human, half-Tenconese child.

**Peter David: *Star Trek TNG: Starfleet Academy*** #3: *Survival* Minstrel YA SF, pb orig, 128 pp, \$3.50. Cadet

## Key to Abbreviations

**hc:** hardcover, almost always an original publication.

**pb orig:** paperback original, not published previously in any other format.

**pb reiss:** paperback reissue, designating a title that was previously published in paperback but has been out of print.

**pb rep:** paperback reprint, designating a title that was previously published

in hardcover or trade paperback (sometimes expressed as **first time in pb**).

**tr pb:** trade paperback, a format using pages larger than a paperback but generally smaller than a hardcover, with a flexible cover.



Worf and his friends from Starfleet Academy must join forces with cadets from the Klingon Empire to survive on a remote, abandoned colony planet.

**John DeChancie:** *MagicNet* AvoNova/Morrow Fantasy, hc, 256 pp, \$18.00. In the author's first hardcover, DeChancie blends technology and the supernatural. A college professor receives a package of computer software that ties him into a network of magical hackers, one of whom is using the net to reprogram the entire universe. . . .

**Diane Duane:** *Star Trek TNG: Dark Mirror* Pocket SF, hc, 352 pp, \$21.00. In this spin-off from the episode "Mirror, Mirror" from the original *Star Trek* series, Captain Picard and his crew encounter a duplicate *Enterprise* from a brutal alternate universe.

**Alan Dean Foster, editor:** *Betcha Can't Read Just One* Ace Fantasy, pb orig, 256 pp, \$4.99. An anthology of food related funny fantasy short stories.

**David Gerrold:** *Under The Eye Of God* Bantam SF, pb orig, 336 pp, \$5.99. First book of a two-book series about humanity's fight to overthrow their bloodthirsty, genetically engineered, vampiric overlords.

**Daniel H. Gower:** *Harrowgate* Dell Abyss, Horror, pb orig, 400 pp, \$4.99. A dead beauty lures an artist to create more than a painting . . . an entrance to hell itself.

**Simon R. Green:** *Down Among the Dead Men* Roc Fantasy, pb orig, 288 pp, \$4.50. When Rangers, magically empowered warriors, are sent to investigate an important fortress that may be in danger, they discover thieves . . . and an ancient Beast of evil.

**Simon R. Green:** Author tie-in reissues: *I Shudder At Your Touch*, 432 pp, \$5.99.

*Blood and Honor*, \$4.99.

*Blue Moon Rising*, \$5.50.

**Martin Harry Greenberg, editor:** *Frankenstein: The Monster Wakes* DAW Horror, pb orig, 352 pp, \$4.99. An anthology of Frankenstein stories. Sequel to *Dracula: Prince of Darkness*.

**Kathryn Meyer Griffith:** *Predator* Zebra Horror, pb orig, 352 pp, \$4.50. In Crator Lake, Oregon, a prehistoric monster begins killing animals . . . and then tourists.

**Simon Hawke:** *The Wizard of Lovecraft's Cafe* Questar Fantasy, pb orig, 224 pp, \$4.99. The latest adventure in *The Wizard of Fourth Street* series.

**Simon Hawke:** *The Outcast* TSR Fantasy, pb orig, 320 pp, \$4.95. Book One in the DARK SUN™ Tribe of One Trilogy. A childhood trauma has turned young Sorak into a "tribe of one": multiple identities trapped within one body. To resolve his inner conflicts, Sorak searches for a powerful preserver wizard known as the Sage.

**Lori Herter:** *Eternity* Berkley Romance, pb orig, 288 pp, \$4.99. A romantic fantasy with a vampire hero. Sequel to *Obsession, Possession, and Confession*.

**James P. Hogan:** *Out of Time* Spectra SF, pb orig, 128 pp, \$3.99. A SF thriller about a Manhattan where time is disintegrating all over the city, and chaos is rushing in to fill the void.

**Robert E. Howard (edited by L. Sprague de Camp):** *Conan 7 The Warrior* Ace Fantasy, pb reiss, 224 pp, \$4.50. Conan and the Aquilonian pirate Valeria confront warring clans who fight with black magic and wizardry.

**Alexander Jablkov:** *A Deeper Sea* AvoNova SF, 1st time in pb, 368 pp, \$4.99. In the early 21st century, cruel research methods have transformed intelligent marine mammals into cybernetic tools for war and space exploration.

**Katherine Kerr:** *Daggerspell* Spec-

tra Fantasy, pb rep, 448 pp, \$4.50. A revised edition of Katherine Kerr's first novel, about the struggle to unite the kingdoms and peoples of the fantasy world of Deverry.

**Vivian Knight-Jenkins:** *Love's Timeless Dance* Love Spell Time/Travel Romance, pb orig, 384 pp, \$4.99. A choreographer finds herself transported to the 17th century Scottish Highlands.

**Katherine Kurtz:** *King Javan's Year* Del Rey Fantasy, 1st time in pb, 512 pp, \$5.99. This sequel to *The Harrowing of Gwynedd* is Volume 2 of *The Hets of Saint Camber*. As young King Alroy is dying, Prince Javan must act quickly to foil the plans of the former Regents to keep him from the throne.

**James Luceno:** *The Big Empty* Del Rey SF, pb orig, 304 pp, \$4.99. The sole survivor of a disastrous intelligence gathering mission is a cyber-enhanced veteran who wants to find some refuge from his unhappy life as a mix of man and machine. But somewhere in his tortured memory he holds the key to the coming war.

**Brian Lumley:** *Hero of Dreams* Tor Fiction, pb orig, 256 pp, \$4.99. In this first volume of a new series by the author of the *Necroscope* series, David Hero finds himself transported every night into the Dreamworlds, a marvelous place where brave folk battle terrible creatures, and he is a real hero. And, each day, David finds it harder and harder to return to the ordinary, waking world. . . .

**Judith Moffett:** *Pennterra* Del Rey SF, pb reiss, 336 pp, \$5.50. When refugees from Earth defy the natives of an idyllic planet, and take action that threatens the ecological balance, the planet and its inhabitants fight back.

**Kenneth Morris:** *The Chalchibuite Dragon* Orb Fantasy, tr pb, 304 pp,





\$12.95. A long-lost novel by one of the founders of modern fantasy. This epic fantasy based on Toltec history and mythology tells the story of Quetzalcoatl, the greatest of the philosopher-kings of the ancient Aztecs.

**Douglas Niles: *Emperor of Ansalon*** TSR Fantasy, pb orig, 320 pp, \$4.95. Book Three of the *Dragonlance*® Villains series. Ariaks, under the grip of the Dark Queen, grows from a mercenary to a warrior-priest, nobleman, and emperor of all the land by climbing over the bodies of his enemies.

**Lisanne Norman: *Turning Point*** DAW SF, pb orig, 256 pp, \$3.99. On a human colony conquered by aliens, a young woman forms a telepathic bond with another kind of alien—a catlike humanoid from a crashed starship—and builds an alliance that offers both races their only hope against their common foe.

**Mel Odom: *Stalker Analog*** Roc SF, pb orig, 352 pp, \$5.99. An SF police procedural about a serial killer on the loose in near future Houston.

**Mel Odom:** Series tie-in reissue of *Letbal Interface*, \$384 pp, \$5.50.

**John Peel: *Star Trek TNG #28: Here There Be Dragons*** Pocket SF, pb orig, 288 pp, \$5.50. While investigating a newly discovered human inhabited planet, the crew of the *U.S.S. Enterprise* finds a culture reminiscent of Earth's Middle Ages... and a ring of interstellar trophy hunters preying on the immense native dragon-lizards.

**Edmund Plante: *Last Date*** Avon Flare, YA Horror, pb orig, 176 pp, \$3.50. A YA horror novel about a high school student who falls under the spell of a new student who practices black magic.

**Jerry Pournelle: *Exiles to Glory*** Baen SF, pb reiss, 224 pp, \$4.99. Revised edition of Pournelle's classic story of a young man from the slums of California,

who flees to the High Frontier of space exploration.

**Jerry Pournelle:** Author tie-in reissue of *Falkenberg's Legion*, 448 pp, \$4.99.

**Mickey Zucker Reichert: *The Legend of Nightfall*** DAW Fantasy, pb orig, 496 pp, \$5.99. Nightfall is a thief, a magician, an assassin, and an adventurer gifted with unique powers—and he is bound by sorcery and oath to protect and guide a young prince on a dangerous quest.

**Mickey Zucker Reichert:** Simultaneous author tie-in reissue of the author's two previous series:

*Bifrost Guardians*

Book #1: *Godslayer*, \$3.95.

Book #2: *Shadow Climber*, \$3.99.

Book #3: *Dragonrank Master*, \$4.50.

Book #4: *Shadow's Realm*, \$4.50.

Book #5: *By Chaos Cursed*, \$4.50.

*The Renshai*

Book #1: *Last of the Renshai*, \$5.99.

Book #2: *The Western Wizard*, \$5.99.

Book #3: *Child of Thunder*, \$5.99.

**Mike Resnick: *Inferno*** Tor SF, hc, 320 pp, \$20.95. William Masterson must discover what caused the planet Jehanum to change, in only 20 years, from a productive world with a model government into the most barbarous world in the galaxy.

**Spider Robinson: *Lady Slings The Booze*** Ace SF, 1st time in pb, 272 pp, \$4.99. Mike Callahan's wife, Lady Sally, welcomes you to her place, where the world's oldest profession takes on some out-of-this-world new twists.

**Fred Saberhagen: *A Matter of Taste*** Tor Dark Fantasy, pb rep, 288 pp, \$3.99. Long ago, Matthew Maule was called Dracula, but to the Southerlands he's just an Old Friend of the Family—an old friend who, for the first time, needs their help to fight his own enemies.

**Fred Saberhagen: *Wayfinder's Story*** Tor Fantasy, 1st time in pb, 256 pp,

\$4.99. The 7th Book of Lost Swords. Wayfinder, the Sword of Wisdom (one of the 12 Swords of Power forged by the Gods and long missing) leads Valdemar into battle against the world's most infamous wizard.

**Pamela R. Service: *Weirdos of the Universe Unite!*** Fawcett Juniper, YA Fantasy, 1st time in pb, \$3.99. In this YA fantasy, aliens disguised as garbage cans invade Earth, but two teenagers fight them by calling up mythological beings on their computer.

**William Shatner: *Tek Vengeance*** Ace SF, 1st time in pb, 304 pp, \$5.50. Book 4 in the Tek series. Ex-cop Jake Cardigan is lured away just before his girlfriend Beth Kitridge is due to testify against the Tek cartel. Then Beth disappears...

**William Shatner:** Simultaneous reissue of the 3 previous Tek books, to tie in with planned TV movies based on the series:

*Tekwar*, \$5.50.

*Teklords*, \$5.50.

*Teklab*, \$5.50.

**Charles Sheffield: *One Man's Universe*** Tor SF, tr pb, 384 pp, \$9.95. In this volume, Charles Sheffield has added two novelettes to the stories previously collected in the *McAndrews Chronicles*, and an updated commentary on the advances in physics that inspired these stories about a physicist and inventor.

**Michele Slung, editor: *Shudder Again*** Roc Horror, hc, 400 pp, \$20.00. An anthology of 22 stories of sex and horror.

**Michele Slung, editor:** A tie-in paperback edition of the first book in this series is also available: *I Shudder at Your Touch*, 432 pp, \$5.99.

**Flora Speer: *No Other Love*** Love Spell Futuristic Romance, pb orig, 384 pp, \$4.99. An explorer in a ruined city is



the only one who sees the beautiful seductress who claims she is his destiny.

**Sean Stewart: *Passion Play*** Ace SF, first US pb, 208 pp, \$4.50. The Redemption Presidency has brought Biblical justice to the sinful 21st century. And the police call upon freelance hunter Diane Fletcher to find out who killed a great Redemption spokesperson and bring the murderer to justice.

**Louise Titchener: *Greenfire*** TSR Fantasy, pb orig, 320 pp, \$4.50. A young water goddess's search for her birthright leads to a mesmerizing battle of wits between a woman who isn't quite human and a king who must rise above his humanity for the good of his kingdom.

**Harry Turtledove: *The Case of the Toxic Spell Dump*** Baen Fantasy, pb orig, 432 pp, \$5.99. A funny fantasy about a bureaucrat with the Environmental Perfection Agency, trying to ensure that manufacturers of magical devices don't foul the environment, who is sent to investigate a Toxic Spell Dump where a bloodthirsty ancient deity is re-opening for business in the L. A. Basin.

**Paula Volsky: *The Wolf of Winter*** Bantam/Spectra, tr pb, 352 pp, \$12.95. In this epic fantasy, a decadent prince secretly resorts to the forbidden art of necromancy in an attempt to usurp the Wolf Throne of the empire of Rhazaulle.

**David Weber: *The Armageddon Inheritance*** Baen SF, pb orig, 368 pp, \$4.99. Sequel to *Mutineer's Moon*. Ex-NASA astronaut Colin MacIntyre's previous hair-raising adventures as captain of the self-aware starship that kidnapped him were easy. Now he has to face the attack of an aeons-old alien menace dedicated to destroying all intelligent life in the galaxy.

**David Weber: *Author tie-in reissue of Path of the Fury***, 432 pp, \$4.99.

**Eric Weiner: *Scream #5: My True***

***Love Gave To Me*** Z-Fave YA Horror, pb orig, 224 pp, \$3.50. A girl has a secret admirer whose holiday gifts are gruesome and deadly.

**Margaret Weis & Tracy Hickman: *The Hand of Chaos*** Bantam Fantasy, 1st time in pb, 496 pp, \$5.99. In this Death Gate novel, characters from the four worlds established in the previous books of the Death Gate Cycle finally meet.

**Margaret Weis & Tracy Hickman: *Into The Labyrinth*** Bantam/Spectra Fantasy, hc, 496 pp, \$21.95. In this sixth out of seven novels in the Death Gate series, Haplo and Alfred find themselves fighting for their lives in a deadly prison maze known as the Labyrinth.

**Paul J. Willis: *The Stolen River*** Avonova Fantasy, 1st time in pb, 192 pp, \$4.50. Sequel to *No Clock in the Forest*. A pair of researchers seek healing magic for William after a tragic accident.

**Gene Wolfe: *Nightside the Long Sun*** Tor SF, 1st time in pb, 352 pp, \$4.99. The first volume of a four-book series set on a giant starship sent from Urth to colonize a distant world.

**Patricia C. Wrede: *Snow White and Rose Red*** Tor Fantasy, 1st time in pb, 288 pp, \$4.99. A novel in the Fairy Tale Series. A new retelling of Snow White, set in the enchanted forests of Elizabethan England and the realm of Faerie.

**William F. Wu: *Mutant Chronicles #1*** Roc SF, pb orig, 256 pp, \$4.99. The first book to tie in with the new *Mutant Chronicles* boardgame. Adventure set in a techno-fantasy universe where 5 megacorporations fight for power on Earth and other worlds.

**Chelsea Quinn Yarbro: *Better in the Dark*** Tor Fantasy, hc, 416 pp, \$22.95. The 8th book in the chronicles of Saint-Germain. A historical horror novel continuing the adventures of the vampire count.



# Taco Del and the Fabled Tree of Destiny



Maya Kaathryn  
Bohnhoff

## FIRST PART Something is Up

Lord E. Lordy wanted the Wiz. That's where all this starts, I s'pose. "This" being the last little war. Wars used to be bigger, according to the Books of Wisdom; maybe people were bigger, too. That would splain the buildings. We only have litte wars here.

I should say that "here" is the kingdom of Embarcadero, the fabled Land Between Bridges. I'm not sure why it is fabled; I only know my parents thought it so. They brought me here from a pueblo in Newmexico when I was a babe. Doing 'things backwards, they came in when everybody else was leav- ing. S'okay with me.

I should 'splain myself. I am Taco Del, Keeper of the Tree

Illustration by Paul McCall

of Destiny and merlin to Hismajesty, King of Embarcadero. Most everyone calls me Taco. Except for Firescape. She calls me Del. "Del," she says, and my insides go all wonky. Sometimes I think Firescape is a merlin in disguise.

But, 'scuse me, I wander. You see, Lord E. Lordy—he's Alcalde of the nextdoor kingdom of Potrero-Taraval—was of a mind to conquer. This was not unusual. Lord E was always of that mind. We hear all the time how Potrero is spreading, bit by bit, south toward Excelsior and Daly. Once in a while he even sends his knights against the Border between Embar and Potrero, but they always get turned back. Usually about the time they see *our* knights with their body-armor and aks and decide brass knuckles and knives just don't cut it. But this time, Lord E determined that he would leave his knights at home and send only smeagles over the Border. 'Cause Lord E had a new merlin, and Lord E's merlin had a plan.

It is my eternal shame that I didn't know this. It was Deadend who brought the smell to Hismajesty's attention. "Somethin's up," he says.

We are hanging in the Throneroom of the Regency Palace when he comes in.

"What's up?" says Squire, 'cause that's his job. Hismajesty don't talk to smeagles.

"It's an ill wind from Potrero-Taraval," says Deadend. "Lubejob's been skulking around the Farm."

"Whose rumble?" asks Squire, scathing-like. "Or did you fabricate?"

"Kaymart and Baggs put me onto the rumble. I saw Lubejob myself—put a tagger on him. Followed him all the way back to the Slot."

"Ask the smeagle, 'then what?'" orders Hismajesty.

"Then what?" asks Squire.

"Then he huddles with his gang. Mark me, Squire, there's evil afoot—we're being scoped."

Hismajesty looks to me. "Had you an inkling of this perfidy, merlin?" he asks me.

"The branches of the Tree of Destiny did quiver," I say and cross my fingers, 'cause the TOD was sitting on the balcony in a stiff breeze at the time. "I perceived no cause."

Hismajesty's brows go all gnarly. "Summon Scrawl," he tells Squire, and Squire turns to the gofer next to him and says, "Gofer Scrawl."

Hismajesty's brows are still looking like smooshed black caterpillars. "Prepare to read the runes," he says to me.

I do, and damn quick. Hismajesty's an ace dude if you're square with him, but if he thinks you let him down—*wbam!*—you could be deadjin in no appreciable time. I don't wish to be deadjin, so I get my rune can and hustle back to the Throneroom. Scrawl is there when I get back, and Firescape and Cinderblock, too, 'cause this looks like it could be a job for the military.

I'm glad she's there—Firescape, I mean. She's a piece of work—number one jade—all rigged out in black leather and red spandies and redder hair, with her Magic Weapon slung at her hip. My pants get uncomfortable. I shake my rune can to announce myself and get my hormones' attention off Firescape.

Hismajesty waves a hand at me. He's not scowly now—mostly, I think, 'cause of *Hermajesty*, who is sitting in his

lap. (Her name is really Ampam and she was born in the produce bin of a minimart on Columbus, but HM doesn't care, though he is of higher origin.)

There is a circular pit in Hismajesty's Throneroom.

Here, we gather to read runes . . . and jam on Saturday nights. The Majesties and the others sit in the soft cushions around the shallow pit while Scrawl and I move down onto the stone floor and begin to circle each other. She shakes her rune bag at me; I shake my can at her. It is a bright red can and says "Hills Bros" on it. There is a picture of a merlin drinking a cup of coffee on the front, and it is this I direct at her so she will remember that *I* am a merlin and she is only Scrawl.

She yields, of course, 'cause that's protocol, and I am the first to spill my runes on the center of the great Mandala in the floor of the pit. We both hunker down to ponder them.

Scrawl makes humming noises and nods as if she sees auspicious stuff. I see nothing but broken chips of glass and bottle caps. There is even a matchstick or two and a button from the fly of my jeans. Scrawl waves her hand over the stuff like she is stirring a pot. I look at her face but her big, watery eyes are mum. I wonder if she is wondering what I see.

I squint at the runes, then my eyes go wonky like they do. I see a shape. Looks like a giraffe, but that doesn't make sense. I look at it some more and it gets to be a crane—the kind there is near some of the big skyscraper carcasses downtown.

"A crane," I say and nod, then see something else. "And a scales."

Scrawl comes to peer over my shoulder. "Yeah," she says. "Could be."

I move to another angle. My wonky eyes see a mountain . . . or a pyramid . . . or maybe it's the Regency Palace. I say, "Mountain," and Scrawl mumbles, "My turn, Taco-face." She moves, too, giving me the hairy eyeball. Then she screeches, "Danger! Danger! They's after something!"

"Shee-it!" says Firescape. "Of course, they's after something. Lord E's *always* after *something*."

I begin to suspect that Scrawl sees less in the runes than I do, but while I am trying to make sense out of "crane," "scales" and "mountain," she stands up straight as a lamp post, clutches her head and says in her best Voice-O-Doom, "They's after Hermajesty!"

The Majesties don't like this pronouncement. They look at each other and get all scowly again.

I check my higher consciousness, trying to sense out what this has to do with cranes and scales and mountains. When I think of mountains, I think of trees. Mountains have lots of trees—more than the Farm, even. And they are much bigger than the Fabled Tree of Destiny—Giants. This makes me think I am supposed to be thinking of the Fabled TOD. I say as much.

"I think of the Tree of Destiny. Runes are not enough. The Tree must be consulted."

Scrawl sees that Hismajesty likes this pronouncement better than hers, so she gives me the hairy eyeball again. I am the only one who can talk to the Tree. Still, she pretends to be agreeable.

"Taco's right," she says. "Meanwhile, I shall consult the wall runs."

We are dismissed, and I make my way up the Great Crystal Elevator to my chambers on the top floor of the Palace. The Palace is much narrower at the top than it is at the bottom. On my floor there are only eight big rooms, joined two and two. Four are the Majesty's; four are mine, although I've considered asking Firescape to share them with me. Half of them have beds so I can sleep anywhere I like. Naturally, I have in mind that she should share the beds, too.

I go to the room I use as a workshop. There, out on the balcony, is the Fabled Tree. He is enjoying the sun, and the tips of his branches reach upward, waving. I am sorry to disturb him, but I must, taking my seat beside him at the balcony.

"O Tree of Destiny," I say. Normally, I call him Doug, but this is ritual stuff. (He's a Douglas Fir. I know this 'cause of the Wiz. I also know that Trees have sexes just like people and animals. I don't know whether Doug is a boy or girl, but the name fits.) "O Tree of Destiny," I say, "we have a problem. Lord E. Lordy has spies upon us. His head smeagle's been seen in Embar. All the little smeagles been seen too. So says Kaymart, Baggs and Deadend. O Tree of Destiny, we fear the kingdom of Embarcadero is jeopardized by these skulkings. Scrawl says Lord E wants Her Majesty. I need to know is this so and how he means to get her."

I bend my face to the little Tree. The boughs brush my cheek. I close my eyes and breathe in the firry smell. It reminds me of the Farm that divides southwestern Embarcadero from Potrero-Taraval, where I spent many child-days.

Nothing happens, except I can almost see the Farm with its giant Trees and flowers and strange buildings. Nothing ever happens and I wonder—like I always wonder—how I got to be a merlin. I know it's 'cause I got the Tree. I say a thanks prayer that Doug chose me and not somebody else (like Scrawl, for instance).

When I open my eyes again, I see something odd. I see a knightie looking up at me from the plaza outside. This is not unusual except that she is half-hiding behind an old trolleycar and she is not wearing Firescape's colors. She is wearing the yellow and black of the Virgin Guard, a gang of knighties who patrol the Richmond near the Farm.

She sees me just as I see her and disappears behind the trolleycar. A chill goes down my spine. I pick up Doug—pot and all—and head back to the Throneroom.

The Majesties are surprised as hell to see me lugging the TOD out of the Great Crystal Elevator.

"What the hell?" says His M and salutes the Tree. Her Majesty throws him a kiss.

I ask Firescape if she knows any reason one of Sweetie's Virgin Guard would be wharfside instead of on her normal beat around the Richmond Virgin. She can't think of any, and when I tell her the Tree inspired me to know there was a yellow knightie in the courtyard, skulking, she and her sidekick, Cinderblock, unholster their magic aks and head for the street.

"Well, merlin?" His Majesty is looking kindly at me.

"Well? What has the Tree of Destiny revealed?"

"The Tree says," I say, though I am clueless, "there are smeagles all about us." I set Doug's pot down and dust off my hands, remembering that nice firry smell and trying to think of something more to say. I do. "The Farm must be watched night and day. This knightie the Tree saw is a phoney. Which means that, most likely, one of Sweetie's gang is deadjim. Maybe more than one. First, smeagles around the Farm, now smeagles in disguise, right here, right now. Think of it, sire. If you wanted something close to Lord E, what better way than to disguise yourself as someone who could get *real* close?"

His M is nodding. "Yeah. Like a knightie. But why a knightie from the Virgin Guard? Lord E's gotta know the Palace is guarded by Red Knighties."

I shrug. "She had to get past all kinds of eyes, Majesty. I suspect she cacked the first knightie she came across."

His M is still nodding. "But is she after my queen?"

I don't know the answer to this, but I'm not about to say that. Scrawl saves me from having to open my mouth. She comes in wailing like a house on fire. "Oil!" she's saying. "Oi! They've left signs! Th' arrogance of 'em!"

They left signs, all right. LORD E RULES! was the sign. Plastered all over the side of the old trolleycar. I didn't have to guess who did it. Only question is, why so bold? His Majesty doesn't ask me again if Lord E is after Her Majesty. He has Firescape set a guard on her and puts all the knighties in Embarcadero on alert.

Rumbles start flying. All kinds of scuttlebutt. I hear all of it, of course, 'cause I'm listening. A good merlin has ears all over the place. A better merlin is pro-active. I go down to the Gee Gah to hang around the steamy stalls and shops that smell of food and herbs and incense. That's where I hear that Lord E's shopping for queens. According to the rumble along Du Pon Gai, he's lost another lady-lord to the dolores. Childbirth, says the rumble. The old ladies and gents in their shops and stalls chatter like pigeons, blaming it on the water, the food, the air in Potrero. Blaming the hivvies—what they used to call AIDS.

On the outside, I think they're right. It could be any of those things. Potrero got its problems, that's a surely, foremost of which is a King who don't give a cold damn about what he can't eat or conquer, one way or another. And there's a lot of sicklies, too. But I know there's always something inside the outside thing—the thing that makes the outside thing work bad. In the case of Potrero-Taraval, that thing is the dolores.

A long time ago, see, this whole place belonged to a people called Ohlone. They named it Awaa-te and lived close to the water. One day, they woke up to find strangers—my own ancestors, I suspect—staring at them from inside these silly tin hats. They put them all into a dios house called Dolores, which means "sad." In this dios house, the Ohlone caught the strangers' diseases—like the hivvies, I guess. They all died. There are thousands of them buried around the Dolores dios house. From the Wiz I learned how the last of them said, "I am all that is left of my people—I am alone."

That is, I think, why Potrero is so sickly and so sad. I think those spirits are still there—the Ohlone dolores.

I am pondering this when I bump into my good buddy,



Creepy Lou. "Thay!" he says to me. "Thay Taco!" (Which is 'cause he's got only one front tooth.) "Thay, Taco! You be thecpin' the rumble? Lord E lotht hithelf another lord-ette."

"I be hearing that," I say. "Third one."

He nods, looking sad. "Third one. Young, too . . . Thecp-ond trimether."

This pokes my alicie bone. "Where'd you hear that?"

Creepy Lou scratches around in his scraggy hair, making dust and leaves rain onto his shoulders. "Shmeagleth." Interesting. "Deadend?"

"Naw, little shmeagle," he says. "One of hith hangabouts. Shmeagle thays, uh, Lord E thinkth we got thome kinda magic. 'Cause Ampam—I mean, Hermatchsty—has three babieth, already, no hitcheth, no glitcheth."

The last word comes out in a shower of saliva. I blink and shake my head.

"No, really. The Alcalde thinkth our women are magic." His face lights up; big holey grin, a little wicked. "I think tho too."

Makes sense, I spose. Odd sense. Lord E didn't have such good family luck. He hasn't produced an heir yet. His M has three—two girls and a boy. So, Lord E might think if he has the right queen—a magic queen—he can have heirs too. And slit Hismajesty's throat to the bargain. I shake my head, this time meaning it.

"Our women aren't magic," I say, "just healthy."

Lou nods. "Damn bad air in Potrero."

"Damn bad attitude," I answer, knowing it's the dolores.

## SECOND PART Something Goes Down

That night, I am asleep in my favorite room when I hear the ruckus. Out in the hallway, voices are shouting. As I reach the door I hear Hismajesty roaring. "Get 'em, dammit! Get 'em!" and the thunder of feet. I pop out my head and I see knights galore, heading for the secret elevator. That's the first thing I see. The second thing I see is His M standing out in the hallway in his briefs with Her M clinging to him like a limpet.

He spies me out of the corner of his eye and says, "How come you didn't see this, merlin? Where were you while all this was going down?"

"I was asleep, Majesty" doesn't sound too good, so I don't say this. I say something equally dumb: "See what, Majesty?"

He splutters and waves his arms. "This attempt on my queen! Dastardly!"

He sees I'm not tracking him and lets go of Hismajesty to come and drag me into their rooms. He drags me all the way to the balcony where he points down the long, sloping wall with its little rectangle pockets of greenery and windows. A doubled cable dangles through a piton sunk in the flank of the palace. I know it's a piton 'cause of the Wiz, where I learned mountain-climbers and Sherpas.

"Wall-crawlers!" snarls Hismajesty, his finger shaking. "Wall-crawlers after my queen! What do you have to say for yourself, merlin?"

His brows crushed together like fighting kittens, he glares at me. The breeze is chill and I realize I am shivering and he is not, though he is all but naked. I am about to say that the Alcalde's merlin must have some serious magic at his disposal, but the thought of Scrawl inheriting Doug sends me on another tack altogether. I draw myself up smartly.

"I knew of this, Majesty," I say and raise my finger skyward. "I saw a crane in the runes, and a scale." I don't mention the mountain, which turns out to be the Regency Palace after all.

The kittens wriggle mightily. "So?"

"Normally a crane would be needed to reach this height," I explain. "And the scale . . ." I point to the rope, threaded through the clip on the piton. "A counterbalance."

"Why the fuck didn't you warn me?"

"Because I also saw that the attempt would fail. If I told you, you might have done something to change that. At the very least you'd have worried out of your sleep. I saw no need to disturb you or frighten Hermajesty."

Hermajesty is sweetly pleased. She smiles at me.

"Thanks, Taco."

Hismajesty's face struggles. Finally he says, "Well done, merlin," and dismisses me.

*By the skin of my teeth*, I think and slink back to my room.

By dawn, we know that the wall-crawlers were Bernal Ninjas—the Alcalde's crack troops—the only ones, I figure, who could've gotten past our best defenses without being seen. By mid-morning we know exactly how they did it. They came in by water.

"Up from China Basin most likely," says Firescape. "Under the wharf at the Point. Stowed their boats under the docks and came up the back way from Fish Alley. Left one of their damn dinghies behind just to say 'up yours.'" Firescape is angry and offended and her skin is all flushed rose-gold. This makes her eyes extra dark, which makes her extra beautiful. Firescape is the only red-headed Chinese girl I know. Her mother's name was Flannigan, she tells me once, and she'll name her firstborn that. I hope to be the father of her firstborn. Flannigan is fine with me.

Hismajesty is also angry. He looks to Squire and Firescape and me. "Advise me," he says.

"Bring in more knights from downtown," Squire says. "Put Wharfside on heavy alert."

Firescape shakes her head, making all that red hair gleam in the light from the morning streets. "Leaves our southwest flank exposed. I say we move Hermajesty to a more defensible position. The Summer Palace or the Grace."

Squire spocks an eyebrow. "I say we do both."

I am nodding when His M gets to me. "You agree, merlin?"

I keep nodding. "A deft move."

"Which, then? The Summer Palace or the Grace?"

I consider this, watching Firescape's face, which is no hardship. The Summer Palace is in a walled compound near the Marina—a wildy sort of place called the Presidio, ringed by little farms. Problem is, it's close to the water. Water, we now know, is hard to defend. The Grace is a

dios house, but it's built like a fortress—reinforced concrete. Problem is, it's as close to the Border as the Regency Palace. I decide this is a decision I must take to the Wiz and say as much.

Hismajesty respects my words, but warns me: "Make it quick, merlin. Lord E. Lordy is scoping the mother of my children. If anything happens to her . . ."

I don't need to hear the rest of that. I cut for the Wiz direct. Firescape goes along—as my military adviser, she says.

The Wiz is quiet as a dios house this morning—full of chatter and the sound of pages turning. There's no singing here, though. Firescape and I move on through the main chamber and into the private places in the back. Here, there are maps of the four kingdoms. Here, I can strategize.

"What first?" asks Firescape when we reach the sanctum of the map room. It's very quiet here and her voice is hushed.

"The Fish," I say and approach that Relic with reverence, genuflecting before it. "Fish," I say, "maps and acrials. North of the Slot."

"Specify," Fish responds in her tinny voice. "Define 'slot.'"

I forget sometimes how literal The Fish is. "Embarcadero. North of the Bayshore. Include the Richmond, north of the Farm."

"Specify 'farm.'"

Fish, being an antiquity, tends to think like one. It uses the old names for just about everything. A good merlin has to be steeped in local history. "Golden Gate Park," I say.

Fish's flat faceplate displays a map. On it, I locate the Regency Palace, the Summer Palace and the Grace. Firescape stands at my shoulder though Fish's face is broad and could be seen from further back. I take this as a sign that my love incantations are working. "Outline these locations," I say, trying not to tremble. I poke my finger at the screen, touching the two palaces and the dios house. After a moment of thought, I add the Virgin, another huge place of worship buried in the Richmond, and the Tin Hao, a dios house behind the Gee Gah. The spots are encircled in five bright colors.

I study the avenues of access, feeling Firescape's breath soft on my cheek. This makes it hard to concentrate, but I see what I need to see. I clear my throat. "It seems to me that the Regency Palace is already the safest place for Hermajesty. I see no reason to move her."

"But it's so close to the Border."

"And the Border is fortified and guarded."

Firescape is unsure. "The Tin Hao would be hardest to get to. No wilds, no down-looks, no tunnels . . . But, the Virgin is built like a keep . . . I vote for the Virgin."

I glance at her, chill. "May I remind you that it was a Potreran knightie in Virgin's clothing that the Tree revealed to me this morning?"

She is abashed and I feel guilty for pulling rank. "Summer Palace, then."

I look at the whole picture again. Part of me wants to agree with Firescape. Forge a bond. Be on the same wave-

link. But deep down in my soul I feel it is wrong to move Hermajesty at all, though I'm not sure why.

"I must cast the runes," I say and back we go to the Palace, pausing just outside the doors of the Wiz to genuflect. It isn't far from the Wiz to the Palace—a bunch of blocks on Columbus is all. We are back again in notime to find the Majesties waiting for us.

Scrawl waits too—Face-O-Doom. I wonder if the Wiz has a spell to get rid of Scrawl. Then I pinch myself for this unworthy thought.

"Well, merlin," says Hismajesty, "where do we relocate?"

"I must cast the runes," I say.

Scrawl snorts.

"You must cast the runes," repeats His M. "You always gotta do something. You consult the Wiz, you gotta cast the runes; you cast the runes, you gotta talk to the Tree. This is my *queen* we're jawing about, merlin. Don't you have any revelations?"

"I do," I say, wondering what they are. I realize something else has happened. Something that's got Scrawl all smug and Squire and Hismajesty all twiggled.

"Tell me," HM demands. "Tell me your revelations."

"It is revealed to me by the Wiz that the Regency Palace is the most defensible place for Hermajesty to be kept. I feel it would be unwise to relocate."

Hermajesty, juggling her younger princess on her knee, is pleased. "Good. I don't want to move. I like it here. The beds are soft."

Firescape gives me a strange glance, then steps forward. "Majesty, I must disagree with the noble merlin. I believe we should move the Royal Family to the Summer Palace." Hermajesty's face screws up prettily. "But it's not summer! There's fog every morning and the Summer Palace is so big and cold. And the beds are hard and the rooms are too big and echoey."

I forget sometimes that for all Ampam has been Hermajesty for three years (with a prince and two princesses to show for it), she is no more than a child, herself—even at sixteen. This outburst reminds me. I think of her in the hands of the Alcalde of Potrero-Taraval—a man with a bad rep when it comes to his ladies' lifespans—and my hot Hispanic blood runs deepfreeze. She'd be joining his other lordettes singing with the Ohlone dolores in no appreciable time.

My face must show fear, for Scrawl looks smugger'n ever. "So," she says, cackle-voiced. "So, you think this is a safe place for Hermajesty, huh? Let me show you the runes I been reading, Taco-face."

She and Squire take me and Firescape out of the Palace and along the pavement to its southeast flank, where there is a shaded overhang. There, she strikes a grand pose—wrath of God stuff, like a beardless Moses. I expect lightning to drip from her finger.

There's no lightning, but might as well be. Our knightie-night visitors have left a message beneath the overhang on the haunch of our majesty's home. It is a semi-cubist mural showing, in vivid detail, what Lord E. Lordy plans for our queen. Up to and including a one-way trip into China Basin if she doesn't plop forth an heir. The artist has a bold sense of color and a flair for the dramatic.

I can almost hear Firescape's hair standing up on her head. "Has Her Majesty seen this?"

"Are you kidding?" snorts Squire. "We'd have to peel her off the ceiling. His M wanted *you* to see it before we paint it out. Thought it might help to clarify the situation."

I hackle. Squire is a spiky bastard at the best of times. Now, he's just plain offensive. "The situation is clear, thank you. But I feel moving the royal family is . . . well, not a good move." I finish, lame. "I *am* the King's merlin, after all. Gut calls are what I *do*. They're my tools."

Scrawl snorts again and pokes a crooky thumb at the mural. "When those damn smeagles got the time to paint a whole fuckin' peep show on the backside of His Majesty's roost, your gut calls ain't worth squiddle. Firescape's got the idea. Move the royal family to the Presidio. And quick, before those scumbags strike again. Maybe paint a love note on Her M's door while they're dragging her to doom city."

Squire is nodding and Firescape is looking at me, sad-eyes. I know I'm going to lose this one. Squire's mind is made up, and His M listens to Squire more than just about anybody.

That night I cast the runes in my workshop. I've just emptied the can when Firescape shows up at my door. For once, the Magic Weapon is nowhere in sight.

She doesn't say anything, at first, just looks at me, and I get nervous. "I'm casting runes," I say, as if that isn't clear as blue-sky, and when she hesitates to come in, I crook my finger at her.

She comes in. I feel heat prickles race up my spine. My merlin robe is suddenly too warm. I strip down to my shirt and pants and feel no cooler. I clear my throat.

"I'm sorry, Del," she says, before I can say something dumb and nervous.

I'm surprised. "For what?"

"For siding with Scrawl and Squire."

"You didn't side with them. It was your idea to move Her M. They sided with you." My intention is to make her feel better. I have the opposite effect; her face gets sadder.

"I'm *very* sorry, Del. I . . . I really thought it was a better place . . . strategically, I mean. It's a ways from the Border . . ." Her voice gives up.

"I was just tagging a hunch," I say. "I got nothing to back it up, really."

She glances over my shoulder. "What do the runes say?"

"Not a whole lot . . ." I begin, looking at them—buttons and bottle caps and chips of glass. There's even a seashell or two and a seagull beak. Looks like a little orange pincers. My eyes go suddenly wonky. *Pincers. What the hell does that mean?* They're clamped around a splinter of driftwood. A voice in my head screams at me to get it. I shake my head. I *don't* get it. Some merlin I am.

"I gotta talk to the Tree," I say, and start to turn, but Firescape's hand is on my arm—on my *bare* arm—and lava is bubbling somewhere below. I can feel it.

"Do you *really* think it's not good to move Her M? You feel that—deep?" Her eyes are like chocolates with gold dust in them.

I feel *something* deep. I nod.

"Then I'll back you with His Majesty. We can defend the Regency . . . I trust you," she adds.

"How old are you, Firescape?" I ask.

She smiles. "Old enough," she says, giving me this *look*. Then she wriggles her mouth. "Sorry, just came out. I'm sixteen—according to Wiz time."

Sixteen. Sixteen and not married and no children. A career woman.

"So," I say, "you figure to quit the Service someday and settle down to have Flannigans?"

Her tilted eyes slip sideways to the windows and she toes the carpet. I notice how the light sheens on her spandied thigh. "Why settle down?" she asks. "Sure, I'd have to take leave while I was . . . you know." She puts her hands out around an invisible belly. "But I could do both . . . with the right dude . . ." She shrugs and her eyes slide back over and kind of bump into mine.

I have no idea, at this point, what my face is doing, so I compose my features and nod sagely.

"Don't you think?" she adds and gives me the *look* again.

"Sounds good to me," I improvise. "I'd want you to be careful, though. I mean, if it was me. If the *dude* was me, I mean." *Lame. Taco. Really lame.*

She takes a step closer, licks her lips. They shine. I can smell her shampoo—jasmine. "Yeah? How careful?"

I lick my lips too. "Well, no hazardous duty. You gotta think of all the little Flannigans, right?"

She's right in my face now—her head tilted back so her chin almost meets mine. "All the little Flannigans," she repeats, and I think those are the sexiest words I've ever heard in my life.

Our lips are nearly touching and I'm counting Flannigans when someone pounds on the door. We part company. Someone turns out to be Cinderblock, looking for her General, Firescape's magic ak in hand. Duty calls, and all I end up with is a sad chocolaty-gold glance as Firescape (future mother of merlins) slips out of my room.

When the pain of disappointment ebbs, I return to the runes. Bird beaks and driftwood. What the hell is that?

I talk to the Tree. I try being all formal at first, but soon Doug gets to me and I'm caressing his boughs and pouring out my feelings for Firescape. Doug understands. He gives me the idea that I need to make a love potion for Firescape. Like most of my ideas, this one comes to me in his perfume. By morning, with his blessing, I have made an attar of fir for Firescape, which I hope will do more than just smell good on her.

### THIRD PART

#### There Is More Going Down Than I Think

Firescape's reconsidering of the move doesn't impress His Majesty. He is determined to follow Scrawl's advice and bug out. I can tell she's been talking to him. Giving her best ooga-booga doom talk. I bring up the bird beak and driftwood and Scrawl is quick to announce that it's a portent. The Alcalde will attempt to seize our queen by

way of the sea. Since the Regency Palace is practically on top of the sea, that goes down like the *Titanic*. I note that Her M has nothing in common with driftwood, but no one hears me. The royal family is packed up and spirited away (belongings and household to follow) until such time as Firescape and the other Generals can put a stop to the threat. Firescape, herself, is assigned to Her-majesty's personal guard. Net result, I will be separated from her until I can pack up my workshop and all my magic crap and make the move.

"I have a bad feeling about this," I quote as we say polite goodbyes in the plaza before the Palace.

"Me too," she admits. "I should stay and guard you and the Tree. Cinderblock could handle the Royal Family."

"No, I understand. Hismajesty wants the best. That's you, General Firescape." I smile and give her the bottle of attar.

Her eyes get big. "What is it, a potion?"

I blush. "Attar of Fir. Smell it."

She does. "It smells just like the Tree!"

I can tell she's pleased. "He helped me make it. It's from his needles."

She smiles and puts some on her neck, then tilts her head to one side. "Does it smell good on me, d'you think?"

I read this as an invitation to get close, so I do. Close enough to feel warmth coming off her skin. "Smells great, General Firescape."

"Jade," she murmurs, tilting her head so she's looking right into my eyes. "Jade Berengaria."

"What?" I say, not daring to hope the potion is really working, and so soon.

"My family names. Jade from my father; Berengaria from my mother. It means 'spear maiden.' She picked it out at the Wiz. She wanted me to have a career in the Service—like her. She's with the Border Guard, south-east." She smiles, then, and gives me a kiss on the cheek. "See ya, Del."

I hold my cheek and marvel. She has given me her family name—her *real* name. Jade Berengaria. I roll the syllables in my head, let them fall from my tongue in a whisper. A precious jewel and a warrior maid. How perfect. Number one jade. I am boggled solemn with the significance of this: In two words, Firescape (Jade Berengaria Firescape) has given me the key to her very soul.

Late that night, an explosion rocks the neighborhood. It's an old boatshed down on the Wharf that burns. A *big* boatshed. Lights up the waterfront for kays. When I reach the Wharf, a crowd has already gathered. I spy Creepy Lou standing there in the bright haze, scratching his head.

"D'you see it?" I ask.

"Juth' about. Looky-dooky." He points at the pavement at his feet. It wriggles like a billion little snakes of wet light. I squat. Effigy. And still wet. Hismajesty, by the painted crown, I think. And next to that, a cubist-looking Ampam struts off with . . .

"Lordy-lordy," says Creepy Lou. "*Voo-doo*."

"Naw. Scare tactics." Same style as the mural. I stand and look about the street. Kids are trying to get close enough to toast hoarded marshmallows and sausages from

the knacker's stall on Mason. Other folks have brought buckets and stuff to carry away the leftover coals. "Anybody see who did this?"

"Not much traffic along here." Creepy Lou unrolls his favorite blue hat and crams it over his head. Tufts of bleached yellow stick out around his ears like straw. I realize he reminds me of the Scarecrow in the Oz books.

He grins at me. "If I only had a brain."

I hate it when he does that. "You see anybody?"

"Thure. Thaw a bunch of kidth and a clown I know from the Gee Gah. But he liveth here."

There is a big, hot *whoosh* as the roof of the shed falls in. The marshmallow roasters and coal collectors cheer and jostle.

"Huh," says Lou. "*Utbed* to live here."

I am appalled. "He wasn't *in* there?"

Creepy Lou shakes his head and I imagine I see a spider rappelling down his gaunt cheek. "Naw. Look."

I follow his scarecrow point to where a dejected-looking clown wilts in the heat. I sidle over and Lou follows.

"Excuse me," I say. "This your place?"

The clown eyes me, realizes who and what I am and clutches my sleeve. "Oh, please, great merlin! Please make the fire uncat my digs!"

The Fireknights have arrived now in a blast of sirens and air horns. The front wall collapses as they reel out, making the marshmallow crowd scatter. I tell the clown that I regret his loss. Can't do nothing for his old digs, but I for sure can get him new. I ask how he'd like to live in the Regency Palace. Then, while he is kissing the hem of my sleeve, I ask if he saw how the fire started.

He shakes his purple frowze, tears trickling away his whiteface. "Just got home. Just opening the door when something hits me—*bonk*—on the pate. It's a fish head. Geez, I think, who'd throw fish heads at a clown? I'm pissed, see, so I head back across the pier to see who did the throwing. I get out there"—he points to the half-burnt planks that lead from the pavement to the big, smoking cinder—"and I hear this popple-popple-popple! Then *roar-whoosh!* No more house."

"Anybody about?"

He shrugs, his lips tremble. "Nobody that shouldn't a been."

"D'you see the fish head tosser?"

"Just his butt for a flash." He shrugs again. "Big butt, red happy-coat. Dime a billion around here."

The clown is right. Among the residents of Embarcadero a red happy-coat is like brown eyes and black hair; *everybody* and his aunt Whoopee got 'em. Hell, I got two.

"Poor dumb shit," says Creepy Lou when I have sent the clown over to the Palace with a note for the steward. Then he grins. "Gonna make old Thcrawl thee red-dy-red."

"How so?"

"Hateth clownth. Thayth they give her creepy-crawl-erth. I thay she oughta check out the mirror." He shivers enthusiastically. "Ooga-booga! Hateth *thith* clown moth thpical 'cauthe he dumped her ath!" He wheezes laughter. "Now he' th gonna be *livin'* with her!"

Lou goes off cackling while I wait for the Firebrigade to wrap things. I see Cinderblock about, playing detective. I go over to ask if she's got anything. She does, but not much.

"Cheap fireworks from Wang's Novelty on Du Pon Gai," she says, holding up a wrinkled scrap of paper. Her nose is wrinkled, too. "Cheap fireworks and ethanol. Nasty combo."

"Arson."

"Count on it. Question is, why and who?" She squints at the major pile of charcoal. "I got my suspicions. Good thing we moved Hermajesty, huh?"

"Yeah. Looks that way." I am holding a hunk of crispy-fried wood, about to chuck it into my belt pouch, when suddenly, I feel like one of Creepy Lou's spiders is crawling down my back. "'Scuse me. I gotta talk to a clown."

The Palace is empty without the majesties and their close, personal servants. It feels strange, creepy. The left-behind knighties are just straggling back in from the fire, their red and black jackets and spandies sooty. The smell of smoke follows them in.

I talk to the clown, whose name is Winky, but he can't tell me anything more. Red happy-coat, he says, and mumbles that somebody's trying to kill him. "Woulda been in there, 'cept for that fish head. Saved my life. S'miracle." I'm not so sure.

Upstairs, I can't shake the feeling that something is wrong—that I am missing something. From my balcony I can see the glow of the ex-boatshed. The marshmallow people have moved in real close, stuff bobbing at the ends of their sticks. The coal collectors work around them. I take Doug to the railing to show him the damage. He quivers and I apologize. I forget how nervous fire makes him.

He's restless tonight and his boughs wave fitfully in the barest breeze. He leans west toward the Presidio. Of course, this is 'cause the wind blows that way. My thoughts lean that way, too, 'cause I worry about Firescape. This is stupid, of course, 'cause Firescape is good at taking care of herself. Better than I am, most likely.

I put my face to Doug's needles to smell what is now Firescape's scent, but the fragrance is carried away from me. I close my eyes and beg to understand the runes I cast the night before. Nothing comes to me . . . except I can still see that dumb bird beak. After that, all I get is a rehash of stuff—the mural under the overhang, the one on the sidewalk. Same artist, I think—some Bernal smeagle with artistic flair. I see the sad, homeless clown that Scrawl hates and a firefighter in a red happy-coat.

Cheap fireworks from the Gee Gah and ethanol. And nobody sees nothing. Gotta have connections to get ethanol, or you gotta rob a stash. No stash robberies since God knows. So the ethanol must've come from Potrero-Taraval, which also doesn't make sense 'cause our smeagles been telling us there's no running machinery in Potrero—no cars, no buses, no lawn mowers, nada. And if you don't have machinery, what the heck do you need with ethanol? Of course, maybe they just use it to blow things up. Which still leaves me with where the flammables came from. I just can't picture somebody sneaking

all the way from the Borderlands with a big old can of ethanol. Of course, the wall-crawlers and mural painters came in by boat. Two boats, Firescape said, one of which they left behind. Maybe they left more than a boat.

A thought comes to me which I throw away, not liking the smell. What if this too-close-to-home stuff isn't Potreroan do? What if somebody *here* is helping out? Somebody who could cadge fireworks from the Gee Gah and ethanol from a stash without getting the hairy eyeball.

Another thought comes: a question. Why now? Hermajesty is at the Summer Palace by now, shivering in front of a giant fireplace, moping 'cause the beds are so hard. First I think maybe the firefighter doesn't know this. Then I think maybe the fire doesn't have anything to do with Hermajesty. Maybe somebody just doesn't like clowns.

In the morning nothing is clearer. I'd stop thinking about it, except that Doug is so upset. His little boughs quiver like a cat's whiskers. I move him to where the wreckage of the clown's digs are not visible, but he is still twiggled. The air smells like soggy ashes. I ask if this is the problem. I inhale his perfume and close my eyes, but all I know is that I *don't* see Hermajesty. All I see is the burning boatshed.

Satisfied that Doug is merely feeling the effects of a wood-burner so close at hand, I go about my day's business, packing a little here and there. Like Her M, I don't really want to leave the Palace. But it's damn lonely here, with the place so empty. The fire's caused more knighties to come down and patrol the Wharf. A lot of them are from downtown and other areas, wearing a rainbow. But most are Red Knighties and this makes me miss Firescape.

I'd even speak to Scrawl this morning, but she's mad at me 'cause of the clown and shakes her bony finger at me and gives me the Look-O-Doom. "Bad times for you, Taco Face," she says. "Bad times."

I tell myself I'm not worried, but I cast runes anyway. I study the rune-fall, looking for patterns. The damn bird beak is still there, so's the piece of driftwood. Being lighter than the other stuff, they fall one way, the glass and metal and pebbles bounce away into a raggedy line along the edge of the table, like a sort of phalanx. A little piece of paper lies between the beak and the wood. I pick it up and see that it's the torn corner of the page from a book. There are page numbers on both sides: five and six. That makes eleven . . . or fifty-six, depending. Eleven or fifty-six what? Or is that even important?

Books. The torn corner is from a book. I decide this means I must consult the Wiz. But not now. It's dark, late, and my head hurts. I sleep.

Sometime in the night, there is a big brouhaha. Pounding in the halls, noise in the streets. Eyes open, I see light dancing and weaving across the ceiling and walls of my room. I check all my windows and realize there is another fire somewhere on the Wharf. I dress and go out. In the street, knighties galore are headed for the piers and I hear the Firebrigade's air horns.

The fire's a monster—down near the Old Ferry Building. Maybe it *is* the Old Ferry Building. That would be terrible; there are a lot of fisher families in that old place.



When I reach the Wharf road, I see it's not the Ferry Building burning, but the two derelict hulks beached next door. Fireknights are already pumping water onto them out of the Bay. While I watch, another troop comes along and starts spraying the Ferry Building. All I can do is stand there and mutter incantations, praying for fog and no breeze.

The hulks burn for hours. Once the flames leap to the roof of the Ferry Building, making the crowds shriek and the Fireknights scramble to pour on more water. They get it under control when the keel of the biggest boat collapses and the whole thing slides into the Bay. The water burns now, too—oily sheets of flame, little bonfires of floating junk. But the Ferry Building is safe.

When there's nothing left onshore but embers, the coal collectors swarm in. Poor pickins—most of the coals are in the Bay. I stay till the end; till all the coal-gatherers have gone, till Cinderblock and her troops have gone over the area.

"Arson?" I ask.

She shakes her head. "Hard to tell. Not much left. But"—she looks out at the smoldering water—"sure was a hell of a lot of fuel on those old barges. Wanna bet there's some missing from the fishermen's stash?"

There is. The fisher families are understandably pissed at the loss. I remind them that whoever did this could more easily have set fire to the whole stash and then none of them would be here to bitch about it. I leave them grumbling and drag myself home, thanking God for the thick fog without which things might have been much different.

Back at the Palace that awful feeling comes over me again, so strong this time, I almost shake. Something is wrong. I try to reason with myself. It's just the quiet. I'm not used to the Palace being so quiet, not any time of the day or night. There's always somebody playing music or gaming or fighting or snooping the kitchens. There's always something going on. Now there's nothing. No guard-ian knights on patrol, no Squire and Squire's many ladies. Nada.

But something is wrong, says this little voice in my head. I don't realize how wrong until I'm in my room again with the lights on. I feel kicked in the head. The walls bleed glossy red with graffiti—one word over and over: GOTCHA. Just that: GOTCHA. Sure as hell did.

Doug is gone, pot and all.

#### FOURTH PART

#### Pot And All (I Begin To Take This Personally)

Now I understand all the quivering. Now, when it's too late. *Some merlin I am, I think. Some stupid, Taco-faced merlin I am.*

I send out knights, but they're about wilted after the fire and I know it won't do any good. I been away hours, fire-watching—like my prayers could do something about the physics of firecrackers and oily goo. Worst of it is, I understand that bird beak now. And the wood chip. Huh. Some light bulb I got. *Now* it comes on. They were never

after Her Majesty. They were after Doug. They emptied the Palace, got us to split our knights between the Wharf and the Presidio, snuck up on our big bare ass and got away clean . . . with Doug.

I send one of Firescape's girls to the Presidio with the news, then, just to keep from going shining, I cast runes. This time, the crap just looks like crap. My eyes don't go wonky no matter what I do. I pick up the little hunk of driftwood and head for the Wiz. Can't wait no more. Shoulda gone when I first saw that little paper scrap. Too late now, but at least I can go to The Fish and ask for maps.

"Show me the quickest way from here to Lord E. Lordy's palace in Potrero-Taraval."

"Specify," says Fish, "which palace. There are three." And Fish pops up a map with three bright spots on it. One of Lord E's places is in a Conservatory, another one is in the old Transbay Terminal—spittin' distance; no way he'll be there. The last one is buried in the Sunset south of the Farm. Far and away from the Border; that's where I put my money. "SF State."

All the spots wink out but one, and Fish draws me a ziggy-zaggy red line all the way from the Wiz to the old University. The line is etched into my pea-brain. I genuflect respectfully, then I am on my way to Potrero-Taraval.

The Farm is beautiful this time of year. The leafy trees are all different colors—yellows, oranges, the purple-red of the little maples. Only the giant conifers are green still. Usually when I walk through them, smelling their sweet pine musk, I'm happy. Now they only remind me of Doug.

I'm not a brave person. It's all I can do not to cry when I finally see Baggs and Kaymart gathering cones under the Giants. They're surprised to see me.

"Great harvest, Taco!" Baggs thanks me. "Number one jade. Biggest squashes we've ever had. Thanks a lot."

Most times I'd be glad to take the praise. Now . . . who cares? "Most welcome," I say, anyway. "You seen any skulking action down here? Last night, maybe?"

Kaymart frowns, cuddling a monster pine cone. "It's funny you ask. I thought the dogs were up to something last night. They sure were raising Cain. Woke me up, oh, about moonset, I guess."

Baggs scratches in his grizzly beard. "I didn't hear nothin'."

"You," says Kaymart, "sleep like the proverbial log." She turns back to me. "What's the problem, Taco? You surely didn't come all the way out here to pay us a social call."

Kaymart talks like the Videoschool Teachers in the Wiz's AV Shrine. Sometimes it's hard to understand her. She got all these quaint aphorisms. I'm having trouble understanding what my problems have to do with her dogs growing sugar. And they do beets here, anyway, not cane.

Right about now I realize how wore out I am. "It's Doug," I say. "I mean, it's the Tree of Destiny. The Potrers snatched it last night. I think they may be headed for the Palace at SFU."

Baggs and Kaymart are blown about sidewise by this news. They helped me raise Doug practically from a fir cone—they're like his grandparents—and they take it

hard. I feel terrible. Doug is gone and it's my fault. Baggs wants to go with me into Potrero-Taraval. Kaymart wants me to stay with them and rest until nightfall.

"You're dead tired, Taco. You probably haven't eaten since God knows when. It'll be dark in about three hours. Stay and rest."

I start to protest, but she gives me a Mother look. "You're not going to do Doug any good in the condition you're in. Just look at that; your hands are shaking."

She's right, and I submit. It's hard to argue with Kaymart when she's in Video Teacher mode.

For dinner, we eat squashes stuffed with pigeon and spinach and talk about my plans to rescue Doug. I talk Baggs out of going with me; he's pretty old and so much like my own father, I sure wouldn't want anything to happen to him.

One thing leads to another and we're reminiscing about Doug's seed-hood. About how I'd been trekking through the Farm dogging Baggs's tracks like always, and how I'd seen the little guy growing cupped between two roots of this big old redwood grandpa (or maybe grandma—you can never be real sure with trees).

"Baggs," I'd said, "isn't it hard for a little guy like that to grow all hunkered on top of those big old roots?"

Baggs had snorted so loud, a flock of quail took off twenty meters downhill. "Hard? S'damn near impossible. Can't put down his tap root. Won't last the winter, most likely."

"Then why'd God put him here?"

"S'a legit mystery, son."

I looked down at the little tree and felt my guts start to quiver. It was the first time I'd ever felt that. And the next thing I knew my eyes went all wonky and I saw that little, tiny seedling in a bright brass pot, and the brass pot was in my arms. "What'd happen, Baggs," I asked, "if I dug that little tree up and put it in a nice pot and took care of it all year round?"

Baggs's funny no-color eyes glinted at me. "Well, I s'pose it'd stand a whole lot better chance of survival."

"Can we? Dig it up, I mean?"

Baggs made every last one of his nine hundred ninety-nine thoughtful faces. He knew how bad I wanted him to say yes. And he knew what having to stand there and watch all those nine hundred ninety-nine faces was doing to my twisty guts. No good, that's what. Finally, he nodded. "Let's get us a shovel and a pot," he said.

We did, and dug Doug up and put him in a pot. (I didn't know he was Doug then, of course.) I insisted I could carry him home on my own.

Baggs watched me hug that big old pot in my arms. "Well, now," he said, "you still wonderin' why God let that little tree grow there?"

I've always been impressed with how well Baggs understood God. Kaymart's always been impressed, too.

"That's one of the reasons I married him," she tells me once. "You could go to the Wiz every day and never come home with even a smidgin of the wisdom in that old bean. I'd trade his savvy for my *magna cum laude* any day."

I didn't know what a magma-come-loud was and asked if it had anything to do with volcanoes, which I was study-

ing in Videoschool at the Wiz. Kaymart just laughed. Much later I find out it has to do with going to a university, which we don't have any of around here anymore.

But forgive me, I meander.

All this reminiscing is making my eyes water something fierce and Baggs tries to reassure me. "You rescued him afore, f'sure," he reminds me. "You'll do it again. You'll see. No doubt about it."

I shake my head. "Back then he was only being guarded by a giant redwood, and that old redwood wasn't likely to pull her roots up out of the ground and come chasing after me for burglary."

"Yeah," Baggs concedes, "but back then, you weren't no merlin either."

"I'm not sure I'm one now," I admit. "Sometimes I think I'm just making it all up."

Kaymart's having none of this. "Nonsense, young man," she tells me, her eyes looking fierce under her frizz of grey hair. "You're most certainly a merlin. I've seen you work. You've got some kind of special ability, that much I know. Your only problem is, you don't have enough confidence in yourself. You just need to bolster your self-esteem."

I almost understand what she's saying before Baggs butts in with a loud bray and exclaims, "She means you need to grow some gonads, boy. Some *cojones*!"

I *have* cojones, of course. Five seconds in close quarters with Firescape is enough to prove that. But I know what Baggs and Kaymart mean. I *don't* have a lot of confidence, but sometime between then and nightfall, I gotta get some.

## FIFTH PART South of the Border

By dusk's early dark, my cojones are no bigger than usual. I decide I'll have to do without. There is a certain cowardly lion I remind me of. If I were the King of the Forest, I'd likely go hide in it someplace. But I got to do this, 'cause it's Doug who needs me, and we've been together a long time.

Kaymart and Baggs give me some drabs to wear; if I go into Potrero in my merlin get-up, I'll have knighties all over me in no appreciable time. (There's only one knightie I want all over me, thanks.) Kaymart helps me tuck my yard or so of wiry black hair under a bernoose and I take off for the Border, all green and brown, looking like a cross between Robinhood and Lawrence of Arabia.

The Border between Potrero and Embar lies just to the south of the Farm. There's a trench that runs the whole length of the parklands on southside—used to be a street. Maps show it was dug up to put in electronics for the masstransit, but it never got done, 'cause right about then everybody decided that cities were no place to live. Too much crime, too much poverty, too much disease; too many problems. Some bright-boys say, "Let's make a new start!" and everybody who can moves the hell out. Everybody who can't, doesn't. There you have it, more or less.

Anyway, the Border has one of these trenches. On the

Embarcadero side there's a brick wall with gates, where there are checkpoints. There, I report to the Black Border Knights that I'm on a mission from God. They respectfully let me pass.

On the Potrero side of the trench there's another wall made of old junked cars and trucks and trolleys laced together with razorbarb wire. Runs for miles. Smeagles say there are no running trolleys in Potrero-Taraval. No running anything—water, electricity, you name it. All sorts of stories come out of Potrero-Taraval on the tongues of smeagles. Stories about gangs and burnings and rapes and horrible diseases; people starving to eat, starving if they can't steal. Sounds like something out of *Mad Max* to me. Like I said, we hear this stuff from Deadend and that bunch. Don't know whether to believe them or not. I've never known truth to stand between a smeagle and a good story.

All this haunts me; I realize I'm about to find out for myself if any of it is true. I go down into the trench where, if I stand on tiptoe, I can see over the lip. I move along, popping my head up here and there, looking for a place to slip through the machine wall. It's a semi-foggy, moonless night—the kind I'd've prayed for if I'd thought of it. But I didn't, so I thank God for thinking of me without being asked.

About a quarter kay from where I drop into the trench I spy a chink between an old trolley and a mangled dumpster. About smeagle-sized. I imagine it's seen a lot of action lately. I go up over the edge, scat over to the wall and squeeze through *real* careful.

Peeking out from the little chink, I see the streets are empty. No. Scratch that. *More* than empty. I see nobody. No knighties, no bystanders, no bikers, no mimes, no street vendors, *nothing*. Not, I s'pose, that I should expect to see ordinary people so close to the fringes, but I'm looking up a long hill and there's nobody there, either. No lights. Not even streetlamps.

Maybe, I think, the knighties are hiding in the buildings. I take a look. But I can see from here that these buildings are also more than empty. Fact is, I can see right through some of them—and I'm not talking windows here, either. I shiver. It's like looking through somebody's flesh and seeing clearbushy through their skeletal. Ooga-booga, as Creepy Lou would say.

A wind frisks up and papers and other light crap blow around on the asphalt and dance in little tornadoes. It makes a moaning, sad sound and I think of the Ohlone dolores lying in the graveyard my ancestors made for them.

*Oh, Taco, I tell myself, you're not in Kansas anymore.* Being a merlin (if not much of one), I know a few incantations for protection. I mumble one now and squeeze out onto the street. It really is empty—so empty the buildings whistle to keep from being lonely.

I recall the Fish's map. A few blocks west of here there is a long, wooded avenue. It runs just about straight to Lord E's Palace. I suspect it will be well guarded, so I go west only one block and begin to work my way south through the ghost streets. As I get farther from the Border, I don't see a whole lot of difference in the scenery. I

*smell* a difference, though, boy howdy! There is a stink like a red tide. It could be the garbage, which seems to be everywhere, or it could be something else I don't want to know about. Either way, I don't go look, but just keep heading south, dipping in and out of shadows, my feet making little shuffle-shuffle noises in the grit.

I count blocks as I go, and when I think I've gone far enough, I cut west again. Then, there are people. I don't see them. But I hear them. First, I think it's the wind, blowing through the empty alleys and crumbling eaves. Then I realize it's voices I hear as I pass before the tired buildings. Whispers and moans in front of this one; I hurry. Laughter here; I relax a little. Rage rolls out of an upstairs window; I hurry again. I hear a child crying, a mother trying to shush it, a man swearing and demanding quiet. As I pass by, the woman begins to sing. I almost stop to listen, but I remember Doug and move on.

My math's a little off, 'cause I end up a block before where I think I should be and see that I'm still short of Lord E's compound. Not only that, but now I see fires deep in the alleys and winking from windows and between the cracks of bad-fitting doorjambs. Out on the wooded avenue, people hang on corners and stuff, warming their hands around barrels full of fire.

I look toward the Palace and see a bunch of folks at the gates just kind of milling around. I think of joining in when I realize they're not getting inside. They're just milling and yelling and dodging stuff coming at them over the fence. Inside the fence are torches and I think I see who's doing the throwing—the first knighties I've seen since I came here.

I don't understand this and I retreat. I duck back into the side street and jog back under the whispers and shouts to the next southbound road. The smell is worse here, where the people are, and I think Deadend must be right about no running water. It makes me homesick for the perfumes of the Gee Gah. Hell, even the fishmart smells better than this. I try to decide what I'll do when I get inside of the compound (*if I get inside the compound*).

Three more blocks and I cut west again, sneaking up on the back of Lord E's place. There're trees and bushes inside the tall chain fence and I think this might be easier than I thought. I find a place in the fence where the razorbarb across the top has fallen away and start climbing. I climb the fence okay. Up, over, and right into the branches of a giant oak. The tree has a big spread and I see I can make the roof on the other side of it. I'm a tree-climber from way back and I move like the wind through the branches.

I'm feeling pretty good about myself, merlin-wise, as I come down onto the roof of the nearest building. Looking down, I can see knighties patrolling the grounds. My incantations hold—they don't see me.

There is a stairwell leading down from this roof, but I ignore it. This is not the main building of the Palace compound—that's about four buildings farther south, according to smeagles, and I can see the top floor from here, lit up like a party-boat. I head in that direction, skulking low to the roof.

The first two buildings are easy—real close together. I

make the jump with no trouble. But the last one is different—a good three meters if it's an inch. And the leap won't take me to the roof, just to a ledge . . . a very narrow ledge. A ledge with windows. I think about going to the ground, but I'm afraid someone might see me. So, I back way off and take a running jump. I make the jump okay, except one of the windows opens up right in my face.

The fall is long—doesn't feel like it. Feels real short. Fortunately, there is some dead grass between the two buildings, so I don't get hurt. Talk about wonky, though—my whole body is wonky. It takes me a moment to get up, a bit longer for my eyes to straighten out. When they do, I do not see what I expected to see—the walls of two buildings and a badly lit sidewalk twenty cee-ems away. Instead, I see the walls of two buildings and four badly lit people about eight cee-ems away and closing. They are just big, dark outlines of people—no faces. This is creepy, so I turn to run.

There are three more big, badly lit people behind me. They have faces, which I discover is just as creepy. I do what anybody would do. I surrender.

## SIXTH PART Treed!

Lord E. Lordy's hangout is a strangely shaped building with a big dome on top—kind of like an upside-down bowl. I scrounge in my memory enough to recall that it's an observatory. Scientists used it to look at the stars. Scientists are a kind of merlin. Near as I can tell, this observatory hasn't really been an observatory for a long time. Even when the scientists were here, there must've been so much light from the City that they couldn't see the stars. Still, Lord E has picked an impressive place to hang.

I'm taken up a flight of grody stairs and down a hallway into the heart of this building. The place is truly gross. Smells like wet camp gear and the carpets are stained and holed like old socks. I think about these things 'cause it helps me not shake so much. Behind thinking about moldy junk, I'm having crazy thoughts about being chopped into little pieces and fed to the fishes. I've heard Lord E has big dogs and I wonder if I'm going to meet them. And I wonder about Doug.

They take me to the Throneroom. I guess that's what it is, anyway. It's a round room, dark, with chairs all the way around. Chairs like in a theater. And in the middle of the room is this big, round platform with a—well, I'd have to call it a robot—standing up on it. The thing's all black and scary-looking—kind of like a giant robot spider—and its shadow is all over the curved wall behind it.

All I can do is stare. I hear this clanking sound and the robot-thing starts to turn around and flickery lights go on inside it. I realize there's stuff happening on the bowl-ceiling, but I'm too scared to look. Can this robot-thing be Lord E. Lordy? *No wonder he's had such bad luck with his lordettes*, I think.

But no, there's a man under the robot-thing. A man sitting in a big chair. Light from the thing falls quavery yellow

low over his face, making him look like a jaundiced mime. I gulp. I've never seen the Alcalde of Potrero-Taraval. I could've lived without.

There is something riding on the platform with him. Something in the dark at his feet. In the funny, pin-prickly light from the robot-thing, I see that it's Doug. I reach for him without thinking. A hand clamps on my shoulder.

"Wait jussa minute, little guy. Bow before the Alcalde." And he pushes me to my knees, whoever the hell he is. I topple.

"Don't look much like a merlin," says the man on the platform. "Looks like a . . . street monkey."

The man behind me wheezes. "Oh, this is the merlin, alrighty." And he pulls the bernoose off my head. "Taco Del, at our service."

The man in the chair leans forward and in the quivering light his hair glistens like an oil slick. "Don't look like much. Small. You really a merlin?" he asks me.

I raise my head. "I am." I have some pride.

He points at Doug. "This yours?"

"That," I say, calm-sounding, I hope, "is the fabled Tree of Destiny."

"Yeah. That's what we thought." He poked his finger into Doug's needles. "So, how does it work?"

I don't tell them, of course. And, of course, I end up in the dungeon—a foul and nasty place of dripping water and cold, hard tile floors. I don't tell them I'm not sure myself how the TOD works. It just does. Or at least, I think it does.

I have visitors in the dungeon—Lubejob, who I recognize as the other guy in the Throneroom—and some Big Ugly Dudes with safety pins and earrings stuck in places I don't think they belong. Not a good sign.

They are here, Lubejob tells me, to provide some incentive. What they really do is beat the crap out of me. Another thing I could live without. They don't really *hurt* me, though—not in the lasting-effects sense, anyway. And I resist telling them anything about Doug.

When the tile floors have collected enough of my blood, they just stop. Lubejob gives me this really weird look and says, "You a guy? Really?"

I'm not about to show him. "Yeah." I mumble 'cause my lips hurt. "Course I'm a guy."

Lubejob makes a rude noise. "No shit. That ain't what I meant. I meant, are you people?"

"I didn't bleed enough for you?" Sometimes I can't seem to keep myself from being a smartass.

He comes a little closer to where I'm lying in a wasted little heap under a sink. His nose wrinkles and makes snuffy noises. "You don't smell like people," he tells me and takes his two pincushion friends out of my face.

When they're gone, I just lie there and smart for a while. When I close my eyes I can almost see the forests around the Farm. Heck, almost! *I can* see them. And smell them. The smell of conifers is getting stronger by the second, which reminds me, suddenly, of Firescape, which makes me want to cry. I begin to think I'm having an olfactory hallucination. Then I decide it's a new kind of vision—a nose vision—and I'm sure Firescape will come for me. I know she will. No doubt about it.

Feeling a little better about having been beaten to smithereens, I get up and discover that the water in these sinks sort of still runs. It dribbles, and that's better than squiddle. It's when I lean against the sink that I feel something prick my thigh and realize something's broken in my pocket and I've just cut myself on it. It turns out to be a little flask of the love potion-attar I made for Firescape. I'm not sure whether to be amazed or depressed. I decide I like amazed better. *Just think*, I tell myself, *even Attar of Doug can give you visions. That's something.*

But the fact is, I'm separated from Doug like I haven't been since the day I pulled him out from under that redwood tree. I start thinking about the first real vision I ever had, sitting in the Wiz reading about the first merlin. Doug was there in his little pot, beside me on the reading table, and I smelled his firry perfume and got all wonky. I daydreamed I was merlin and in my daydream I warned Baggs that one of the Giants was going to fall in the next big wind. Funny thing was, when I cleared my head, I still knew that tree was going to fall. I remember looking out and seeing leaves blowing in the street and knowing the wind was coming up. I hopped on my bike, dumped Doug in the basket and rode as fast as I could to the Farm. And I told Baggs about that Giant falling and I even pointed out which one and which way.

"Why, that," he says, "that'd take out my new greenhouse."

I apologized, but couldn't think of anything else to say. There wasn't much in the greenhouse 'cause he was just now putting stuff into it, but he gave me this *look* out of his no-color eyes, then told me to help him move the stuff he'd already put in back out.

Another funny thing, I was right. The wind came up to a screamer and that old Giant fell—*wbammo*—right down on Baggs's new greenhouse and I knew right then that there was this thing between me and Doug and that I was going to be a merlin.

*And now, I think, now look at me.*

I'm starting to get depressed when I realize the little flask of Doug's attar probably just saved my life. In fact, I'm sure it did. Someone's still looking out for old Taco.

I spend about three days in the dungeon before they try again to get me to talk about Doug. When I'm dragged into the Throneroom this time, there's lamplight—some kind of oil by the smell. And one of those battery camp things, stolen from Embarcadero, no doubt. There's another dude there, too—an old dude with one squinty eye and wearing a long, scraggy beard and a ton of chains and beads. Looks like a court jester, but gotta be the Alcalde's new merlin, I figure.

I'm right. The old dude comes up to me and gives me an eyeball no less hairy than Scrawl's finest. Then he sniffs at me: sniff! sniff! snuffle! All the hair stands up on my body, 'cause one of the rumors making the rounds in Embar is that in Potrero-Taraval, soylent green is people, if you index my reference. *Holy Maya, Mother of Buddha!* I think, and start praying.

But this weird old merlin dude doesn't pull out his knife and chopsticks. Instead, he opens this squinty eye of his and says, "R'you a tree?"

I ponder this, realizing that *this is important*. I am reminded of something from the Videoschool at the Wiz, which is, when someone asks 'Are you a god?'—say 'Yes.'

I say, "Yes."

"Shit," says the old dude and turns to the Alcalde under his weird robot (which I realize I saw once in a science book). "Shit, he's a tree."

Lord E sits back in his throne and eyes me up. "So, then, this is your bro, hey?" He points to where Doug sits in his brass pot.

I look, and the breath sticks halfway up my throat. The pot looks worse than my face—dinged up, I mean. Like they've been kicking it from here to eternity. Worse, some of Doug's branches are bent and broken and the little blanket of moss I laid over his earth is gone. The earth is so dry, I can see cracks in it.

Suddenly, I can't swallow; my mouth is bone dry and my whole body's shaking like I'm standing on a fault line, which I am. I don't answer the Alcalde's question; instead, I give him the wrath of Taco. "Savage!" I croak. "What've you done to my Tree?"

Lord E giggles—not laughs, giggles. "Your Tree? *Your Tree? My Tree*, I think. It's sittin' in my Throneroom. And all we did was play a little Q and A. It won't tell us how you work either. So . . ." He looks all bright and sunny at me. "Which one of you bites it first?"

Looking at Doug, I'm afraid he's gonna "bite it" immediately. I scowl menacingly. "Clearly, you have no idea what you're dealing with here. *This*"—I point at Doug, hand-quake—"is the Fabled Tree of Destiny, the Great Oracle through whose branches blow the winds of Fate and the secrets of Eternity. In this immortal conifer are the answers to all the major wheres and whyfores asked since time immemorial. This is the repository of wisdoms galore. Through this Tree, the future is seen and secrets are known . . . and all that."

"And I s'pose," says the squinty old dude, "you're the only one who knows how to get answers out of it, huh?"

I nod, squinting back.

"So . . . one of you's no good without the other, right?"

"You got it."

This makes the squinty dude do a dance and hi-five the thin air, which makes me very nervous. I glance at Lord E, and Lubejob, who are also looking pretty pleased.

"We got it," says the Alcalde. "Lubejob, get on the grapevine and see that our dear bud, Mercedes, gets the rumble. We got both his merlin *and* his damn—uh, wha'd you call that thing . . . ora . . ."

"Oracle," I mumble, my heart doing a hindenberg. It's clear to me that I have once again gone clueless. I thought I was leading them; all the time, they were leading me. Worse, I still don't know what they really want. I mean, first I think it's Her Majesty, then I think it's Doug and, for a moment, I even think it's me.

I'm feeling truly sorry for myself when something hits me—Lord E called His Majesty by name. "How'd you know . . .?"

"The name of your lamebrain King?" the Alcalde finishes for me. He grins, showing yellow teeth, and I wonder what they do for dental hygiene here. "We got our ways."



Yeah. I'll bet. Up to and including inside smegals.  
"What do you want, Alcalde?" I ask, trying to look fierce and merlinly.

He leans down from his throne, still grinning. "For now, I got what I want. I got you and I got your Tree. Two of the things that make Embarcadero tick."

I glance at Doug again, seeing how pathetic he looks. "You won't have us for long if you don't feed us. The Tree is dying."

Lord E twists to give Doug a sharp look. "How the hell do you feed a tree?"

"You give it water. If you don't give it water, it dies. Then you can forget about having one up on Hismajesty."

Lord E scratches his greasy head. "That's it—water?"  
"I feed him other things, too—coffee grounds, oak mulch, fish emulsion—"

He waves me down. "Sounds like merlin stuff to me. Discuss it with Squint." He thumbs at the squinty old dude, then tells him, "Keep them alive . . . for now." Lord E's leer is one of those things you could go through your whole life without seeing.

Squint gets a couple of Big Ugly Dudes to escort me and Doug to his workshop. I'm impressed. With his workshop, I mean. It's a little gross in some ways—a little on the primitive side—but number one jade in others. It's a big room with high, dark rafters and this one cool window that's like a wall only slanted in like a roof. There's all sorts of fire pots hanging all over the place, giving off this scented smoke like the incense in a dios house. It smells kind of nice, which is more than I can say for the rest of Potrero-Taraval.

Squint's escort puts Doug down by the window and my heart drops into my shoes when I see how pale his needles are. I want to cry, but this would be unmerlinish, so I bite my lip instead.

Squint gets water from a rain barrel and brings it to me. "Where's his mouth?"

I am bewildered by the sheer ignorance of him. "Under the earth. He drinks and eats through his root system."

"Yeah?" Squint watches me pour the water into the pot. "You too?"

This old dude really thinks I'm a tree. "No. I drink like a person. Part of my schtick. You know—merlin stuff."

"How'd you get like this? People-like, I mean?"

"Evolution."

He shakes his head. "I don't know that spell."  
I didn't think so. "Look," I say, "you got anything he can eat? Fish emulsion, coffee grounds . . . ?"

He's shaking his head. "Never heard of the stuff."

"You guys eat fish?"

"Yeah, sure."

"So, get me a fish."

"So, don't give me orders, treeman."

"Please," I say.

I show him how to make fish emulsion and explain that it's also good for people and makes a great, if stinky, salve for burns. I figure maybe I can make friends with this guy—schmooze a little, merlin to merlin, et al.

I'm schmoozing away, listening to him rattle on about fertility spells that don't work, when I see something out-

side the window. It's a grey day, kind of foggy, but I think I see a flash of red and black between some scrubby-looking bushes. My heart flips over a couple of times. I'm sure Squint can hear it, but he just keeps talking.

When Squint's all through with me, he puts me in a better room. I tell him a few things about the way the TOD works—like that he needs a certain amount of sunlight. I'm hoping for a downstairs room with windows; I get an upstairs room with a skylight. Good enough, I hope, 'cause I'm pretty sure I know that red and black flash. I think Doug knows too, 'cause his needles start quivering the moment I see the flash and don't stop even when we are in our new room. It's a sign of some sort, I figure, and I stare at him until my eyes go wonky and it seems like he's waving at the skylight.

Suddenly, I get it. He wants me to rig a signal. But what would Firescape see and recognize that the Potreran Knighties wouldn't? In the moment I ponder this, it seems to me that Doug waves even harder, filling the air with scent and making one of his bent boughs dance. All at once I understand; Doug is offering the injured bough as a beacon. Overcome by this selfless gesture, I remove the branch as gently as I can, praying I don't hurt him much. Still, I feel a horrible twinge in my gut when the bough comes free.

I take the branch—it's about as long as my foot—and climb up on a table to reach the only window in this place; it's half-boarded up and half-covered with stiff mesh. Inside the mesh is broken glass. I stuff the branch through a fist-sized hole in the glass and out through the mesh. I let go of it, then, praying it will stay. It does.

Doug and I settle down to wait. He sends me a waft of perfume that prompts me to gently remove the other broken tips from his boughs. I use them to rub more scent on myself, too, and put the crushed remains in my pocket.

## SEVENTH PART Rescued?

It's nearly dusk when Squint shows up again, bringing food and a bottle of cola. The food isn't much, some scraggy veggies and undercooked potatoes, but I am truly amazed by the cola. I didn't think the Potrerans had any of the niceties of civilized life left. They've always seemed sort of down on technology. I used to think Lord E was just hogging it for himself, but I can sure tell that's not true.

Squint waves the bottle at me. "You rate bigtime, merlin," he tells me. "This is from the Alcalde's private, personal and very secret stock. I don't even get this stuff unless I done something mega."

"Take a swig," I offer, seeing another way to suck up.

He swigs quite adequately before passing me the bottle. Then he watches me while I eat and drink. "So," he says after a while of making my skin crawl, "so, you eat regular food. . . . How come you don't eat fish emulsion and bone meal like your bro?"

"Appearances," I fabricate. "I gotta maintain a people shape. I gotta eat people food. Otherwise, weird shit happens. It's part of the magic."

Squint is interested. "Weird shit, huh? Like what?"  
"Like, you know, my hair goes green and spiky, my skin gets rough, my toes start wriggling around, looking for dirt."

"Whoa," says Squint.

"Pretty rude," I agree.

"So, where'd you learn your stuff? Turning into people, et al."

"Oh, uh . . . the Wiz."

For the first time, he looks like he maybe doesn't believe me. "How does a tree get into the Wiz? Somebody plant you in there?"

"Sort of. You see, the last merlin of Embarcadero was a normal guy. He had a Tree . . . me. When he came to the end of his long and illustrious career, he had no apprentices that suited him. So, he created himself an apprentice via transmogrification." It's scary how easy this stuff comes out sometimes.

I can tell by Squint's expression that I've lost him, but he doesn't let on, really, just nods like, 'uh-huh, *sure*, I got it.' "So," he says, turning his nod to Doug, "he's like your apprentice, then, huh? You gonna do the same thing with him, when you start creakin'?"

"Yeah," I say and take another swig of cola. My eyes wander up over Squint's head to the darkening skylight. A face is peering in at me through the grimy glass—Fire-scape's face. I gulp, nearly choke myself and hand Squint the bottle. "Here, have some more," I say, but it's hard to hear myself over the racket my blood is making pounding around in my head.

While he's swigging, eyes closed, I glance up again at Firescape. She makes a little sign. 'Get rid of him.' Yeah. Like I haven't already considered this myself.

Squint hands me back the bottle—one swallow left. I kill it and give him the empty, though I don't s'pose they recycle over here. "Tell Lord E thanks for the special treatment."

Squint actually grins at me. "You're a special dude." He doesn't leave, though. Just keeps grinning and squinting. "So, you get all your schtick from the Wiz, too, huh?"

Geez! *Everybody* gets their schtick from the Wiz . . . or one of the little Wizlets. Where else?"

"Everybody? Including Hismajesty?"

"Sure," I say and try not to sound testy. I can see Firescape hovering up there, waiting. "All the kids go there. They start off in the AV Shrine with Videoschool. Then they do books. When they're old enough, they find their calling and go with it."

"Calling?"

I twitch nervously. "Where they fit in. What they want to do. The Service, Firebrigade, teacher, butcher, baker, candlemaker, artist, merlin . . . court jester. Whatever."

Squint frowns. "Those're callings? You got people who just do that stuff? I mean, like a kid says, 'I wanna paint pictures' or 'I wanna bake stuff' and then they just do it?"

"Yeah, well, they get the inside on it from the Wiz and when they're ready, they do it."

"Why?"

"Why? 'Cause they like to do it and it needs to get done. *Somebody's* got to do it, right?"

Squint scratches his head. "Hismajesty says, huh?"

"It needs to get done," I repeat, not getting why this guy is so dense, "or Embarcadero don't work." I don't feel quite so unworthy to call myself a merlin, all of a sudden. "Look, Merlin Squint, I'd love to jaw all night, but I'm really dragged and the TOD wishes to consult with me about some stuff."

Squint's left eye pops almost open. "He told you that?"

I nod.

"Just now?"

I nod.

"I didn't hear nothin'."

"He only speaks to one man," I say and point to myself.

"I get it. *You* understand him 'cause you're a tree, too."

I nod.

"Geez. Can I watch?"

"No way. Communications between a merlin and his Tree are privileged."

"Huh?"

"He's shy."

"Oh. Oh. yeah. Well, any guy who eats through his fecet." He shrugs. "Scuse me."

At last! I look up at Squint vacates and see Firescape giving me the thumbs-up.

"Uh . . . one more thing, Merlin Taco," Squint says from the doorway.

I gulp, jerk my head back down. "Uh, yeah?"

"Where'd you get your Tree?"

"The Farm."

"The Farm. That's that park across the Border, right?"

Where the old dude and dudette hang?"

I nod.

"Weird couple of ducks. Always digging around in the dirt—feeding the trees, I guess." His eyes get real big and he points at Doug, all reverent. "Wow, like *that* one, huh?"

"Yeah, yeah, like that one."

"Course, you can't get the big ones out of the ground, I bet . . . I mean, they can't, like, get up and *move* or nothin'."

"No," I agree, about to cry. "Not usually."

He scratches his beard, nods. Stands there for another minute. I want to scream and Doug is quivering like, well, like a tree, I guess.

Squint squints one last time, then leaves. I nearly pass out. Little sparklies swarm around inside my eyes. But I hear Firescape above me, tapping on the skylight and I look up. Through the swarm of sparklies she signs me to move back out of the way. I do, and the next thing I hear is the crunch of breaking glass.

In no appreciable time, Firescape is standing in front of me and I'm deciding if I should hug her. She doesn't wait for me to decide. She takes things into her own hands—or arms, as the case may be.

"Taco Del, you idiot!" she murmurs lovingly (I hope). "You gotta screw loose, or what? I couldn't *believe* . . . When Geranium told me . . . You *yutz!*" She gives me this big, outrageous kiss, right on the lips. Hard. Then she socks my jaw. Also hard.

"I love you," I say, which makes the pain worse, but who cares?

Her nose wrinkles. "And you tell me I gotta be careful. C'mon. Grab the TOD and let's scramble."

I look up along the rope that brought Firescape down to me. "How're we supposed to get Doug up there?"

"Doug?" She glances at the Tree. "Is that . . . ? *Wow!*" She looks at me all bewoggled then, and says, all solemn, "Thank you, Del. I will not betray this trust. And . . . and I love you too." Then she points up the rope. "I'll go up first. You make a cradle around the pot. I'll hoist him, then I'll send the rope back down for you."

Good plan. And everything goes pretty smooth. Not a drop of soil lost. Blood neither. Out on the roof, though, we got a problem. We gotta slide the pot to the back edge without (1) making a hell of a racket and (2) accidentally rolling Doug off the sloping roof (also, coincidentally, making a hell of a racket). We finally link arms and pick up the pot so we are face to face on either side, looking at each other through the boughs. They tickle my nose. For a guy who's just been starved for three days, Doug sure feels heavy.

"You just watered him, didn't you?" Firescape whispers. I nod and stifle a sneeze.

We have to crab-walk to the back edge of the roof. Our footsteps sound like thundering hordes of something and I slip twice and skid some inches toward the edge of the roof. Then I get the hang of it. I also get a little cocky, and the very moment I think about already being through the Fence, I slip, I fall, I take a long, lonely skid on my furry tummy, right for the edge of the roof.

Suddenly, there is air under my feet and space opening its big yawp below me and a big, hairy scream building up in my throat. Than, a hand clamps on the back of my jacket and I just stop, legs swinging in the air, a rain gutter crimping my ribs.

Firescape, clinging to a rope, puts her face next to mine and hisses, "Hold me." I'd like nothing better. I wrap my arms around her waist and dig my fingers under her belt. Together, we crawl back up to where Doug waits, Firescape's climbing hook sunk into the tiles behind his pot.

"Thank you," I whisper, but Firescape merely detaches herself from me and says, "Thank me when we're outta here."

We start moving again; sidle-sidle, slip-slip, ouch-ouch. It seems to take forever, but at last we are at the back edge of the building and do the cradle thing again, this time going down.

*Okay, I think, this is it. We've done it.* But I've forgotten about the Fence. *Now* I remember it. Which, I think, says something to me about the nature of reality. The Fence will not go away just 'cause I need it to. Neither will the curls of truly wicked razorbarb across the top.

While I pause to reflect on this, Firescape hunkers down and disappears behind a bush. Before I can ask what she's doing, the bush rolls clear over, showing a little severed trunk and Firescape standing behind. She's pulling on the wire which parts like—well, like cut wire.

She holds the edges apart and grins at me. "After you, Merlin Taco," she says.

"After the Tree of Destiny," I correct, and drag Doug over to the hole.

It takes both of us to hoist him through the hole, then I follow while Firescape covers us with her Magic Weapon. I'm just straightening on the other side of the Fence when I hear her say, "Shit," in that tone of voice that can only mean one of two things: "Shit, I have stepped in something unpleasant," or "Shit, we have been discovered." In this case, it is the latter.

"How," I ask Firescape as we are herded along by five Big Ugly Dudes, "did they get the drop on you?"

She scowls ferociously. "I got caught in the damn Fence, coming through after you. Couldn't even get the damn muzzle up." She snorts, glancing to where her ak rests in the hands of one of the aforementioned Dudes. "Some Magic Weapon."

Now I am scared. I didn't think old Squint had it in him to thwart the magic of an Embarcaderan Weapon. I have learned an important lesson: Never underestimate a fellow merlin, no matter how much like a court jester he is.

That merlin and his lord are grinning ear to ear when the Big Ugly Dudes bring us in. I notice the grins get even bigger when they gander Firescape. My insides get freeze-burn.

"Bonus prize!" says Squint and Lord E says, "Merlin Taco, you've brought some really good shit my way these days, but this takes the garbanzo. How'd you know I was down a lordette?" And the two of them wink and yuk it up.

I realize suddenly that I have been had six ways from Sunday. I grip one of Doug's little boughs tight enough to draw sap. A wave of perfume hits my schnozzle and makes its way to my weeny brain. "Scrawl," I say aloud. "You got Scrawl to say all that garbage about deadjinn lordettes."

"Not garbage, exactly," says Lord E. "S'true, y'know. I really do go through lady-lords pretty fast. But, yeah, it didn't hurt to have Scrawl's moutthin' off."

"Yeah," Squint guffaws. "That old hag is so hot to crumble your tortilla, she'd buy the Baybridge from a blue whale if it'd do the job. Passin' along Lord E's sad, sad story was nothin'."

"And the wall-scrawl? She did that herself, huh?"

"She's got imagination," says Lord E.

"Yeah, and a source of ethanol and fireworks." It comes clear, at last. The only thing I'm not sure of is what these two are *really* after. Huh—I mean, what I've helped them get besides, possibly, me and Doug and Firescape. I grab her hand and think real hard about what I've said.

Somewhere in the middle of all this thinking, it comes to me where all Squint's questions were headed—straight to the Wiz.

## EIGHTH PART Straight To The Wiz

In the end, we meet at the Border across the trench—Alcalde to King, smeagle to smeagle, Squire to Squint. Today, the dead Potreran buildings are full of eyes. I feel them prickly my skin. A bridge has been laid over the trench for this momentous occasion and on the Embar side, old Scrawl looks smugger'n hell. She figures my goose is toast. She's probably right. Firescape and Doug and I are

brought front and center while one really Big, really Ugly Dude holds Firescape's ak on us. He does not know how to use it. I don't know whether this is comforting or not.

"As you can see, Mercedes," says Lord E, and Hismajesty winces at the sound of his name on Potreran lips, "we got yer merlin, yer Tree and one very pretty knightie—a General, she tells me. I bet you'd like to have them back, hey?"

His M snarls. "Scunge," he calls. "Slime. Of course, I want them back, scum. Your terms, scuzz, your terms."

The Alcalde is unaffected by this heroic speech. He merely chuckles. "My terms—simple: Let me at the Wiz."

Hismajesty's eyes all but pop out of his royal head. "Squire's too? And, to my irrelevant satisfaction, Scrawl's."

"The Wiz? But I thought—"

"Ha-ba!" crows the Alcalde, and Squint cuts a caper. "As you were meant to think, Mercedes, old bud. 'Cause what I *really* want is all the other stuff you got—guns, ammo, running water, electric light, warm clothes that don't come secondhand from dead folks. I want to keep the cold out and the warm in. I want a merlin who can *do* something, not just rattle his beads and chains and dance the oingo-boingo." Squint goes all surly when he hears this, but Lord E forges on: "I want to keep my lordettes from cacking before they plop forth an heir. I want to make more of my favorite cola. Shortly, Merc, I want the magic you been hoggin' in that place. And don't tell me it's not there. I know what I seen and I seen all the good shit you guys have got. Plus I got it on grapevine and a hot say-so that *that's* where all the good shit comes from."

His M blinks at Squire, who shrugs.

"He says," I translate, "that he's got it on good authority that the Wiz is the fountainhead of all our knowledge." I don't tell them that I'm the authority of which we speak.

"I see," says His M, looking majestically pained. "And if I accept your terms . . ."

"You get your property back."

"You don't *have* my property," says Hismajesty, taking a literal tack. "You have my knightie, my merlin and the Fabled Tree of Destiny—all of which better be none the worse for wear."

"Whatever."

"And if I decline?"

"Huh?"

"He asks what'll happen if he says no," I translate.

Squint and Lord E and that scum, Lubejob, all light up like Winky's ex-boathouse. "Well," says Lord E, "in that case, we'll just keep your merlin, your knightie and your Tree and thank you kindly. See, I can always use a lordette, and my merlin here could sure as hell use some help merlining, and as for the Tree, well, there's no telling what I could do with *that* kind of magic. So you see, what I got here is a win-win."

More grinning.

At this point, Firescape leans over to me and whispers in one of my red-hot little ears, "Del, *do* something magical. I don't wanna be a lordette. I don't wanna have little Alcaldes. I wanna have little taquito Flannigans."

In this moment of great desperation, as I see my maj-

esty deliberating on what is the lesser of two evils, I don't care what happens to me. But for Firescape—for Jade—I gotta do something. As usual, I look to Doug for help.

Okay—stupid, I s'pose. I mean, maybe he *is* just a pet tree. And maybe I *do* sort of exaggerate a few things about me and him and us. And maybe I feel wonky sometimes (like right now) 'cause I'm just naturally wonky. But then, maybe not. Whatever—at this moment, I look at Doug sitting there in the watery sunshine in his poor, dented pot and see his boughs and needles all a-quiver and a-shimmer with weird light and time starts to crawl.

It comes to me, then, like Doug whispered in my ear: *Everything's gonna be okay, Taco-boy. Let them into the Wiz—the Wiz will take care of itself, you'll see. 'Cause it really is magic.* I'm convinced. Yeah, convinced I'm wacka-wacka. But hell, what's a merlin to do?

"May I speak to my lord?" I ask Lord E. "I think I can, uh, speed things up . . . maybe."

The Alcalde gives me the eye. "You ain't gonna split on me, are you?"

I am so incensed, the hair jumps up on my head. "And leave my Tree and my true love in your slimy hands? I'd sooner leave you my liver. I'll be back."

The Alcalde gives me the go-ahead. As I walk across the bridge, I feel something behind me. Hairs stand up on my neck and say, 'Howdy!' and I know it's the smeagle, Lubejob. I sweat. What I got to say to Hismajesty is not for the ears of smeagles. But here I am, face to scowling face with my majesty and I gotta say *something*. I can almost feel Doug quivering the air behind me. Wonky whispers come to my inner ear.

I bow to my King. "Majesty," I say, "have no trepidation. The TOD informs your worthless, despicable merlin that we are to evince no concern. I am assured that all will proceed felicitously to a satisfactory conclusion. Go ahead and let Lord E. Lordy at the Wiz." I add for Lubejob's benefit. "No deleterious effects will accrue. You have the Tree's word on it." And I wink slowly for emphasis.

Hismajesty's left brow spocks upward and I detect an itty-bitty grin at the corner of the royal mouth. "I see," he says. "A bit of subterfuge is afoot."

"Indubitably," I affirm, though I feel clueless.

"So be it," says my liege. He raises his head, peers across the trench and waves. "You got it—the Wiz is your oyster. Come on down, Elvis!"

*Elvis?*

A glance at Lord E proves he is none too pleased to have his real name flapping around on enemy lips. A glance at my lord proves he is well aware of this.

"What goes around, comes around," he growls. "Now you know what the 'E' stands for."

We proceed to the Wiz in a strange and wondrous procession. His M calls out the royal vehicles: a fleet of flip-top Mercedes (match), flanked by a rainbow of knighties on chrome chargers—mostly Hondas which hold up better than Harleys, generally.

Lord Elvis is impressed as hell and practically licking his lips, 'cause he just knows the Wiz is gonna give him all this good stuff too. There goes our strategic advantage . . . and my head with it, I don't doubt. About now, I'm

racking my pea-brain trying to figure out how the Wiz is *not* gonna give all this good stuff away.

The loud procession winds through the streets of Embarcadero, watched on by the good and confused citizens of same, who surely deserve a merlin better than what they got. Elvis and Squint and the smeagle ride in one of the Mercedes, keeping Doug and Firescape between them just in case. I ride with His M, all the time feeling Scrawl's beady blues digging holes in the back of my head. She's mad as hell, 'cause she had to be hoping His M was gonna strand my butt in Potrero-Taraval.

Scrawl and I go way back . . . unfortunately. Back to when Hismajesty was just a kingleet and in search of a merlin to replace the one that had just given the Final Notice. I had a wonky vision of a freak storm, which, since everything else I had wonky visions about happened, I took to His M. Scrawl laughed right in my downy face, but Hismajesty took some cautions in spite of the fact that no one else had said squiddle about a storm. As it happened, I was right. The storm came and it was a doozy. Which made Doug and I look like the Good Witch of the West and Chief Engineer Montgomery Scott rolled into one, and Scrawl look like a quack. Scrawl has not cared much for either of us since.

But back to the present crisis. Lord E-for-Elvis is just about glowing as he and his right- and left-hand dudes and the Big and Ugly squad stand and gaze up at the sign that hangs above those hallowed doors—the sign that devoted acolytes have kept bright and new and spiffy clean for decade upon decade. CITY LIGHTS BOOKSTORE, it says in letters two cees-em high.

The Alcalde looks at me. "This the place?"

I sigh, praying I am not just naturally wonky, that I have really heard and smelled Doug's fiery whispers. "Yeah, this is it."

He scowls. "Don't be yankin' me, Taco-face."

"He's not," says Lubejob. "I been here. I seen it. This is where they do their magic. Pictures that move . . . cars, boats, bikes, even people. The cars are in these little boxes and they drive them right out of the pictures, I bet. I ain't no merlin, but I seen the moving pictures."

*What the hell?* I think, but old Elvis the Alcalde is already on the move. "Good enough," he says and leads his smeagle and his merlin and his Big Ugly Dudes into the Wiz.

I'm appalled. Lord E just stands there and gapes like a beached fish, turning and turning, not even aware that he has interrupted scads of folks in the worshipful act of reading. I know how he feels, though. Whenever I lay my unworthy eyes on these knowledge-crammed walls, I am overwhelmed and awed.

Finally, Lord E stops turning and gaping and says to me; "So, where's all this great stuff, all this magic and whatnot you guys promised?"

I am perplexed. "It's here. All around you."

"Show me. Show me how you guys get all your stuff."

I choose the book upon which our government rests. It is called *Arthurbur* 'cause it's about that great father of all monarchs and his magic kingdom. I hand the book to Lord Elvis, who gives its colorful cover a long look before opening it. He stares at the first page, then begins flipping quickly through the pages, stopping here and there to look at the pictures, which are beautiful. Finally, he slams the book closed.

"These pictures don't move," he says to me, then looks at Lubejob. "They don't move. They just sit there." He waves the book at me. "Are they all like this?"

"Yes and no," I say. "That one is about government. Its companion volume—uh, the next book in the series—is about the very first merlin. The others are about . . . well, everything."

"About? How can it be about anything? It's full of pictures of—of big dudes in tin cans on fat horses. And what do these scrawls mean?" He pops the book open, making me fear for the binding. "Are these the magic runes?"

And, finally, I understand. "Those are words," I say. "Those tell the story, not the pictures."

"What's he mean?" he asks Squint, but Squint just shrugs and squints and jumps like a scared cat when the Alcalde tosses the book into his hands. "Read the runes, merlin," he demands.

But Squint can't read them either. "I can't," he says and looks about ready to cry, and I actually feel sorry for the geezer.

The Alcalde grabs the book and points it at me again. "You're trying to tell me these runes tell you how to make electric light and feed all these fat people?"

"Not *those* runes, particularly, but others."

"Bullshit," says Lord E. "All bullshit. What good are runes my merlin can't read? You're yankin' me, Taco-face. These ain't magic. Hell, we use this crap for fire-starters." And he dumps *Arthurbur* back into my hands with no ceremony whatsoever. "Where're the moving pictures, Taco-boy? Where's the *real* magic?"

Of course, what he means is the videos. I tilt my head toward the AV Shrine, kind of let my eyes wander that way like I really don't want them to.

He grins at me and waves a hand at the Big Ugly Dudes. "What we want's back there. I don't know what it is, but Lubejob will know when we find it, won't you, Lubejob?"

Lubejob agrees that he will know it immediate, and with that, they take off into the back rooms and begin searching for this magical stuff they think we're hiding. Which, of course, we're not hiding at all.

Hismajesty sidles up to me as we tag along. "What's up, Taco?" he asks. "Can't these Philistines read?"

I shake my head. "It would appear not."

His M grins. "Then the Wiz can't do them any good?"

I cross my fingers. "We'll see. There's still the videos," I say, which goes down like the *Titanic*. His M's grin goes flat.

By now I hear noises of great turmoil from the AV Shrine. His M gives me a little shove and I hurry to investigate, Hismajesty, Squire and Firescape on my heels. The Big Ugly Dudes have cleared one whole shelf of video op-



disks and have piled them on a table in the center of the room. Squint stands by, an op-disk in each hand, clearly clueless as to what to do with them.

"What is this stuff?" he wheezes at me, while behind him, Lubejob mutters, "This is the place. Yeah, this is the place. This is where I saw the magic pictures. There was a box. And the pictures were in the box."

I point at a Learning Booth, then gingerly open the smoky plastic door. A Video Disk Recorder and screen are set up inside.

"Yeah!" says Lubejob. "Yeah!"

"You can watch a video in one of these booths," I explain, "or go to one of the Videoschool rooms."

"Now we're getting somewhere," says Lord Elvis.

"Show me how this works."

Squint shoves an op-disk into my hands and stands back, arms folded, looking like a squinty, grubby Pharaoh. I go into the learning booth and plug the disk he's chosen into the VDR. It is Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*—PBS version. This should be interesting.

The video screen comes to life and a voice says, "This program is brought to you through a grant from Cornell University and . . ." The voice rattles off a list of sponsors (which are like patron saints) and the Big Ugly Dudes hunker down and glance about shifty-eyed.

Then the program starts—pictures of black holes, nebulae, comets whirl about while this incredible music plays. Then appears the man we reverence as The Sagan. He is smiling (he is always smiling, 'cause knowledge brings happiness) and he tells us how we go about our lives knowing almost nothing of our world. How we don't even think about where sunlight comes from or how come life even is or why we can stand and walk and run on a big ball spinning in space without ending up there ourselves. And chaos—he mentions chaos. And then there are pictures of the solar system and a close-up of Earth with an arrow that points to the blob that contains Embarcadero and Potrero-Taraval and a whole lot else and says, YOU ARE HERE.

"What's this? What's this?" Elvis snarls.

"Physics," I say calmly and send silent praise to the Wiz and the all-knowing Dios Who gave it into our unworthy hands.

"Shit," says Elvis, and Lubejob all but spits at me.

"What's with the marbles? Where're the cars and the bikes and all the great-looking food?"

Squint shoves another video at me. "What's this one? It's got cars on the box; does it do cars?"

"That's *The Art and Business of Auto Maintenance*. It shows how to fix cars when they break down."

Lord E howls. "I don't want to *fix* cars, dammit! I just want to *have* cars!" He gets in my face, then. "What the hell is this stuff? Where's all the magic shit you promised me?"

"Right here, Lord E. In the books, the videos—"

I can tell he doesn't believe me, 'cause he throws a video at me. Shortly, he and his BUDs (the aforementioned Big Ugly Dudes) have torn the place apart, looking for the magic that makes Embarcadero work. They topple shelves, upset reading tables (not to mention readers), and put a

dent in the Fish's console. When they are finished, the Wiz is one humongous mess, but I don't see any real damage. I can only pray they don't decide to torch the place.

They don't torch the place. They snarl and snap at His majesty and demand cars at ak point. By now, His M has gotten into the spirit of the thing. He enjoys seeing old Elvis all sweated up. He jerks a thumb at the front doors. "You want cars? Go get 'em."

They do. It takes them all of two minutes to discover that cars do not magically drive themselves. And these guys drive about as well as they can read. Surprise, surprise.

In the end, they get so busy seething and frothing that Doug and Firescape and I slip from under gunpoint. They hoof it back to Potrero with no Tree, no Wiz, no magic, just one, lonely little ak with less than half a magazine of ammo. They are not Real Clever Boys, so I don't expect they'll learn how to make more.

His M yuks it up real big when they've all gone and pounds me on the back. "Well done, merlin! Well done! Those guys make bozos look like Rhodes Scholars. But tell me, why did you allow all the chicanery to impact our idyllic lifestyle?"

"Well, sire," I say, "I was trying to smoke out a mole; Lord E has a most secret double-smeagle in our court."

Already Scrawl is sidling away. She is forced to sidle all the way to the Borderland where she is politely ushered to the Potrero side and the bridge rolled up behind her.

I, meanwhile, am hailed as a hero. I eat this up for a while, then the niggling starts. Okay, so it's probably es-tupido, but I feel sorry for Elvis and his bunch. I mean, they're not *such* bad guys, really, just . . . underprivileged, I guess you could say. Anyway, it comes to my attention that Doug feels sorry for them, too.

We are in the Wiz, helping to clean up the mess and sort the books and videos when he sends me a whiff of firry perfume from where he sits in the sun on a reading table. "Taco," he says to me, though not in so many words, "Taco, Potrero needs educating." And a little later, he hits me with this outrageous idea: "Taco," he says, "*make* them understand—find a way to share the magic."

Well, let me tell you, this knocks me six ways from Sunday. Not just the thought of selling Hismajesty on a Potreran literacy campaign (which makes my guts jiggle), but the idea of selling the Potrerans on it. I consult with my lovely wife of one week, Jade Berengaria Firescape, who thinks it's a great thing to help the Potrerans.

"You know, if the children could be taught to read," she tells me, "they could teach the grown-ups. And then we could do vocational rehab."

Yeah, *if*. Big *if*. But I know it's not as easy as all that. Even if His M would go for it, Lord E wouldn't. 'Cause there's a wall between Embarcadero and Potrero-Taraval—and I don't mean the one along the Border made of old junk. Well, this one's made of old junk, too, I guess, but it's a different kind of junk. It's inside junk. Like I said before—it's the inside stuff that makes the outside stuff bad.

One big thing I learned from seeing Lord E and his guys in the Wiz: We don't think the same. And the difference is . . . well, I guess it's this: Lord E thinks magic is

about *having* things; in Embarras, we know it's about *knowing* things.

It is Firescape who gives me a clue about how to handle our King. She tells me that the best way to get to His Majesty is through *Hermajesty*. I know this, I say, 'cause that's what landed us in this mess in the first place. *His M* was scared for *Her M*.

"No," says Firescape. "That's not what I mean at all. I mean if you tell *Her M* about you—I mean, about Doug's idea—and wait a week or so, *His M* will be bogged to pieces when you come tell him the Fabled Tree's just recommended the very thing he's been pondering for ever-so-long."

Funny how that works, which it does. Now I am *sure* Firescape is a natural merlin. And I am not only a *bero*, I'm a *humanitarian*. But there is still this problem,

which is how to share our magic with the Potrerans. I s'pose I could just stroll into Lord E's Throneroom and make a proposal, but I don't think he'd listen. Besides, I'm not sure the magic ak they took off Firescape has run out of ammo yet.

I don't even bother with the rune can. I now realize it was always Doug, all along—the visions, the premonitions, the words coming out of my mouth before I could even think them, et al. I take the problem straight to him. And Doug says we should spring a leak. A magical leak, so that knowledge can just trickle south little by little.

So, now I'm looking for a place to make a hole—just a tiny, little hole—in that wall of old junk that separates Embarradero from Potrero-Taraval. I'll find it. I know I will. No doubt about it. ♦

## About the Authors

In recent years, **James Gunn** has been more visible as a writer *about* science fiction than as a writer of science fiction. He has long been one of the field's leading critics and historians, and now, with the publication of "The Futurist" as this issue's lead story, he demonstrates (just in case anyone had any doubts) that he hasn't lost the ability to spin a tale.

Jim's previous appearance in this magazine was a historical/critical essay called "SF the British Way," in our May 1993 issue. That piece, in slightly modified form, will serve as the introduction to the fifth volume in his series entitled *The Road to Science Fiction*.

As another installment of the never-ending saga "Where do you get your ideas?" we present a brief rundown on how **Barry B. Longyear** came to write "The Dreyfuss Affair." It started with an article on Ford's Theatre published in *National Geographic* magazine about twenty years ago—an article that featured a photo of John Wilkes Booth at the age of 26.

We've seen the same photo before, and it never occurred to us—but it obviously did occur to Barry—that Booth, in that image, bears an uncanny resemblance to the actor Richard Dreyfuss at around the same age. Interesting, but how to use that observation as the seed of a story? "The Dreyfuss Affair" is one author's answer to that question—and further

proof of the adage that *getting* an idea is only the first step in the creative process. You also have to be able to pull it off, and this is something Barry does very well.

**George Zebrowski** is perhaps best known for his novel *Macrolife*, which has recently been reissued in the Easton Press "Masterpieces of Science Fiction" series. The setting and flavor of that book are mirrored in his latest story, "In the Distance, and Ahead in Time." This novelette is planned as part of a collection of works set in the *Macrolife* universe—a worthy introduction to the concept for those who haven't read the novel, and an extra treat for those who have.

The setting **Lois Tilton** uses for "Unmasking the Blackman" is something we describe as "not quite Chicago." And in a similar vein, the story itself is not quite like anything else we've ever seen. It certainly is remarkably different from Lois's previous appearance here—"Aristodemus," in the December 1991 issue.

If you're going to publish a JFK assassination time-travel story, November is an appropriate time for that. And if you want one that's not cut from the same old cloth, try "In the Loop" by **Jane Mailander**. Jane is a *Writers of the Future* alumnus who's making her first pro magazine appearance with this story.

**Jack Dann** set a major challenge for himself some time ago when he contracted to do a historical novel about Leonardo da Vinci. If what we've seen of it is any indication, the book can't miss. "Vapors" (June 1993) was a story sliced out of the longer work, and now for an encore Jack gives us "The Path of Remembrance," which is also the title of the novel.

"There are so few *upbeat* stories about pigs nowadays," says **Thomas M. Disch**. His way of redressing the problem was to compose "This Little Pig Had None," which not incidentally is also a tribute to the virtues of Diet and Exercise and other stuff that's good for you.

**Alan Kirk** makes his debut in this magazine, and his second professional fiction sale, with "Love in the Land of Law." Alan doesn't say whether the story is meant to be prophetic; we prefer to think of it as a bit of cynical fun, but we're keeping a look-out over our shoulder just in case.

"Taco Del and the Fabled Tree of Destiny" is not a title designed to make anyone take its story seriously, but don't be misled. The latest effort from **Maya Kaathryn Bohnhoff** is madcap and zany, but it also has something important to say—which, in the context of Maya's story, is not at all a bitter pill to swallow.

# AMAZING® STORIES

## Back Issues and Anthologies

If you like what you've seen in this issue of AMAZING® Stories, there's more where it came from. We have a small selection of back issues dating from the 1970s, plus almost every magazine from May 1990 through October 1993, available for purchase by mail order. The list on this page and the facing page mentions every magazine that's for sale, and gives a few of the stories you'll find in each one.

The list also includes six paperback anthologies that were produced by TSR, Inc., in 1985 through 1987, reprinting many classic stories from older issues—a great way to pick up a representative collection of what was being printed in the good old days. Also available is another anthology, *Cinemonsters*, which is described in detail on the following page.

All of the anthologies and most of the magazines are in mint condition. Among the copies of any single back issue, the magazines in mint condition are sold first. Every publication has a money-back guarantee—if you aren't satisfied with what you get, send back the merchandise you don't want and we'll reimburse you for the price of the item(s) plus the return postage.

Prices of the digest-sized magazines vary according to age, with the older issues costing less than the newer ones (because the cover price of the older magazines was lower).

After you've totaled the prices for the old magazines you want, add on a postage charge of \$1.00 for the first issue and 50¢ for each additional issue through the tenth one. If you order more than ten digest-sized magazines, you don't pay any additional postage charge.

Full-sized issues, beginning with May 1991, are priced at a flat rate of \$5.00 each, which includes postage. (Prices for the anthologies also have postage costs built in.)

To make an order, write out clearly and legibly the magazines you want, calculate the total cost, and enclose a check or money order for that amount. Send your order to the magazine's business office (P. O. Box 111, Lake Geneva WI 53147). All orders will be shipped via third-class mail or UPS within two days of receipt.

If we can't fill your order because of sold-out issues, we'll reserve for you the issues we can sell you; then we'll send back your check or money order and ask you to send us exact payment for the items we can provide for you.

As an option, you can ask to receive one or more of the anthologies as a replacement for back issues that might be sold out. If you like this idea, just tell us the anthologies you'd like to have, in order of preference, and we'll make sure that you get your money's worth.

### DIGEST-SIZED MAGAZINES

—\$1.25 each—

#### September 1972 15 copies

*Fat City* by Ross Rocklynne; *Deflation 2001* by Bob Shaw; *Proof* by F. M. Busby; *Jupiter Project* (first of two parts) by Gregory Benford

#### January 1973 30 copies

*The Ascending Aye* by Gordon Eklund; *Night Shift* by George R. R. Martin; *On Ice* by Barry N. Malzberg; *Close Your Eyes and Stare at Your Memories* by A. G. Moran

#### August 1973 43 copies

*To Walk With Thunder* by Dean McLaughlin; *The Once and Always War* by Gerard F. Conway; *Up Against the Wall* by Robert Thurston

—\$1.50 each—

#### November 1978 9 copies

*While the North Wind Blows* by Christopher Anvil; *Green Thumb* by Marion Zimmer Bradley; *Last Rocket from Newark* by Jack C. Haldeman II

—\$1.75 each—

**May 1990:** *Giant*, *Giant Steps* by Robert Frazier; *Computer Portrait* by Jayge Carr; *Fatal Disk Error* by George Alec Effinger

**July 1990:** *Harvest* by Kristine Kathryn Rusch; *The Secret of Life* by David Brin; *Sequoia Dreams* by Sheila Finch

**September 1990:** *Harlem Nova* by Paul Di Filippo; *At Vega's Taqueria* by Richard A. Lupoff; *Wboso List to Hunt* by Susan Shwartz

**November 1990:** *When the Ship Comes In* by R. Garcia y Robertson; *Command Performance* by Kathie Kojas; *Behind the Eyes of Dreamers* by Pamela Sargent

**January 1991:** *Stranger Suns* (Part One) by George Zebrowski; *A Painting Lesson* by Nina Kiriki Hoffman; *Life in a Drop of Pond Water* by Bruce Bethke

**March 1991:** *Dog's Life* by Martha Soukup; *The Dragon of Aller* by John Brunner; *Stranger Suns* (Conclusion) by George Zebrowski

**FULL-SIZED MAGAZINES**  
—\$5.00 each (includes postage)—

**May 1991:** *A Tip on a Turtle* by Robert Silverberg; *Change of Face* by Kristine Kathryn Rusch and Kevin J. Anderson; *Kleptis* by John Brunner

**June 1991:** *Victoria* by Paul Di Filippo; *Hitmen—See Murderers* by Timothy Zahn; *the button*, and *what you know* by W. Gregory Stewart

**July 1991:** *Except My Life, Except My Life, Except My Life* by John Morressy; *Arms and the Woman* by James Morrow; *The Perfect Hero* by Elizabeth Moon

**August 1991:** *Fantasies* by Michael Swanwick and Tim Sullivan; *The Number of the Sand* by George Zebrowski

**September 1991:** *Death Link* by Gene DeWeese and L. A. Taylor; *The Storming Bone* by Ian McDowell; *Thomas and the Wise Men* by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

**October 1991:** *Skin Deep* by Brian Stableford; *The Drifter* by Lawrence Watt-Evans; *Line Item on a Dead Grant* by Jack C. Haldeman II

**November 1991:** **LIMITED SUPPLY** *The Implanted Man* by F. M. Busby; *The Year of the Guns—Part Two* by Rick Shelley

**December 1991:** *Word Salad* by Phillip C. Jennings; *Touche* by Gregory Benford; *The Long Fall* by Ben Bova

**January 1992:** *The Round-Eyed Barbarians* by L. Sprague de Camp; *Natural Selection* by Lawrence Watt-Evans; *The Sleeping Serpent* by Pamela Sargent

**February 1992:** *Complications* by Brian Stableford; *In Brass Valley* by Avram Davidson; *If There Be Cause* by Sheila Finch

**March 1992:** *Let Time Shape* by George Zebrowski; *The Call* by John Morressy; *Reawakening* by Mark J. McGarry

**April 1992:** *Missing Person* by William F. Wu; *Life in the Air* by Barry N. Malzberg and Jack Dann; *Isabella of Castile Answers Her Mail* by James Morrow

**May 1992:** *Blades of the Dtram Ring* by Barry B. Longyear; *Messages Left on a Two-Way Mirror* by Nina Kiriki Hoffman

**June 1992:** *The Last Reunion* by Harry Turtledove; *Little Brother's Turn to Watch* by Kevin O'Donnell, Jr.; *The Red World and the Blue* by Ben Bova

**July 1992:** *The Vortex* by Phillip C. Jennings; *Lennon Spex* by Paul Di Filippo; *In and Out With Me* by John Morressy; *My Father's Face* by Ian McDowell

**August 1992:** *Come Back to the Killing Ground*, *Alice*, *My Love* by Roger Zelazny; *The Logic of Location* by Alexander Jablokov; *Last Wish* by Martha Soukup

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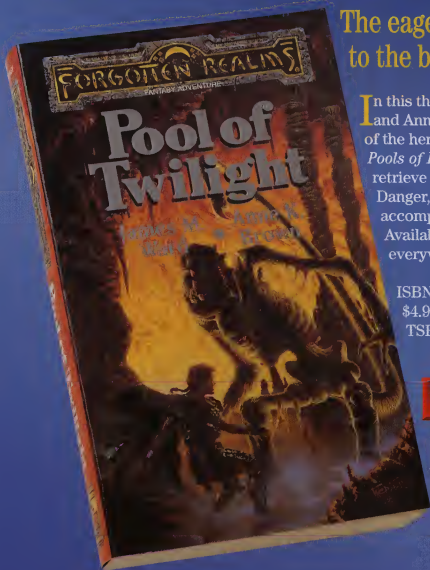
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